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TRAGEDY

F. L. LUCAS

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TRAGEDY

IN RELATION TO

ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*

BY

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TO

CLIVE BELL

Ces sortes de spéculations ne donnent point de génie à ceux qui en manquent ; elles n'aident pas beaucoup à ceux qui en ont, et le plus souvent les gens de génie sont incapables d'être aidés par les spéculations. A quoi donc sont-elles bonnes ? A faire remonter jusqu'aux premières idées du beau quelques gens qui aiment le raisonnement, et qui se plaisent à réduire sous l'empire de la philosophie les choses qui en paroissent le plus indépendantes, et que l'on croit communément abandonnées à la bizarrerie des goûts.—FONTENELLE.

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TRAGEDY

I

ARISTOTLE AND THE DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

THERE is something Roman about Aristotle. He has not glided into immortality with the bright grace of the Greek; he has conquered it, province by province, with the determination, the monumental strength, the hard good sense of Rome. Even when the ancient world had fallen into ruin, the ways his thought had paved still guided the medieval mind amid the thickets of its theology, just as the Roman roads ran on across the wasted lands where the eagles had yielded place to the raven and the crow. And as, even to-day, when we whirl along our dusty highways, we still cannot go far without following or crossing the line of the Roman's march, so beneath most paths of modern thought endure the foundations laid by the master of Alexander the Great. This is particularly true

of the criticism of Tragedy. There are places where Aristotle's foundations have given way, places where he leads us wrong; but even where he leads us wrong, he leads us straight. Here is none of that twisting and wriggling and rambling common in modern criticism overgrown with its thickets of jargon, floundering through its swamps of pseudo-psychology and fancy metaphysics. One knows always that Aristotle means something, though it may be wrong; as one knows with Dr Johnson, and with the tribes of would-be Coleridges one does not know. Aristotle's curt comments on the Attic drama will seem dry enough in comparison with the mixture of limelight, incense-smoke, and holy water now commonly supposed to conduce to the appreciation of an ode of Keats; but it is better to be dry than rotten.

If, then, it is asked by some modernist why it is really necessary at this time of day to hark back to the dramatic opinions of a Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C., the answer is not so much that Tragedy, both the word and the thing, is Greek by origin—for we are concerned with what Tragedy is, not what it was; nor that the experience of twenty-five centuries has proved Aristotle infallible—for it has not. The truth is that we do not go back to Aristotle so much for the right answers as for the

right questions. To ask them is the first step towards truth; and to ask them is one of the greatest gifts of Greece. Greek art has had its due of praise; but this other greatness of theirs is less often trumpeted. Other peoples have fashioned into art and story dreams as lovely; but it is from the Greek that Europe has learnt, so far as it has learnt, to question as well as to dream, to take nothing on earth, or in heaven, for granted—that unfaith, in a word, which has also removed mountains. The annals of Israel are filled with rebellions of the Chosen People against their God; but it never occurs to them to abandon one deity except in exchange for another, or to ask whether it was after all reasonable to suppose that creation began with a man and a woman, a serpent and an apple. And so with the other nations that we know. They loved, as men do still for the most part, certainty better than truth. Greece too had its priests; but it was never priest-ridden. It had its myths and its theology; but it is as though such things had never been, when one morning in the sixth century B.C. Thales of Miletus in Ionia quietly asks, "Of what is the Universe composed?" and answers, "Of water." His answer is, as it happens, false; we are looking for the true one still; but the great thing is that

man has begun the quest with his intellect in place of his fancy. As with Thales and his successors, so with the eternal, ironic questioning of Socrates; and so with Aristotle. His answers we shall again and again find wanting: much comes to light in twenty-five centuries, dark as many of them have been; but there is to this day no better starting point for the subject of tragedy than the *Poetics*, regarded as a *questionnaire*. And if that work became for centuries after the Renaissance a millstone round the neck of Tragedy, that is because the Greek philosopher was not studied in the Greek spirit, but rather as if he had been a Hebrew prophet verbally inspired. This is no exaggeration of the amazing authority once enjoyed by Aristotle's philosophy as a whole. When, for instance, an Italian commentator found a seeming inconsistency between Aristotle and the Bible, to Dacier that was a *reductio ad absurdum* in itself. "As if," he cried, "Divinity and the Holy Scripture *could* be contrary to the sentiments of Nature on which Aristotle founds his judgments!" Even to the temperate Lessing the *Poetics* appeared "as infallible as the elements of Euclid"; and there are more modern critics to whom these pages remain almost sacred still. Naturally the paradox of treating a Greek philosopher as another Moses, and

bringing the infallibilities of meaner minds into that free Greek world of thought ended in an equally violent reaction. Aristotle has been "the master of those who know" only for those who know also what "master" means, and that a teacher is not a tyrant. To-day, indeed, all is changed, and we are no longer in any danger, as when Ortensio Laudi wrote (1543), of "putting that vile beast Aristotle on the throne and depending on his conclusions as if they were oracles." Yet the *Poetics*, ill-written, incomplete lecture-notes as they are, remain even now the model of an inquiry into the nature of Tragedy. Those few pages ask, if they do not answer, almost all that we need to know.

Our best starting point is the famous definition of tragedy which opens chapter vi.: there could be no better example of Aristotle's useful power of provoking disagreement. "Tragedy," he says, "is a representation of an action, which is serious, complete in itself, and of a certain limited length; it is expressed in speech made beautiful in different ways in different parts of the play [1]; it is acted, not merely recited; and by exciting pity and fear it gives a healthy outlet to such emotions." Thus Aristotle

[1] This refers to the differences of metre and dialect between the Choric Odes and the Dialogue of Greek Tragedy.

states in due logical order, first, what tragedy is and represents; secondly, the form it employs; thirdly, the manner in which it is communicated; and, lastly, the function it fulfils. At the outset we may note that "Tragedy" does not for the Greek imply an unhappy ending; it means simply a drama which renders human life seriously, as contrasted with comedy, which renders it grotesquely.[1] However, this difference once recognised, the definition seems simplicity itself. And yet it may be doubted whether any sentence in literature, outside theology, has contained a greater hornets' nest of controversies.

"Tragedy is a representation, an imitation" (*μίμησις πράξεως*). The phrase disappears beneath a crowd of struggling æstheticians; for how far and in what sense should Art *imitate* life? Into vague generalisations about "Art" this is in any case no place to go. At best very little can be said that is

[1] Aristotle does indeed elsewhere *prefer* the unhappy ending (chap. xiii. 6), though even this is to some extent contradicted by what he says in chap. xiv. 9. In the Middle Ages, curiously enough, instead of meaning a drama, not necessarily with an unhappy ending, "tragedy" has come to denote any narrative with an unhappy ending, not necessarily a drama. The unhappy ending has, in short, become the one essential thing. Thus da Buti, a commentator on Dante, explains that Tragedy (="Goat-Song") derives its name from being, like a goat, prosperously shaggy before and miserably bald behind.

worth saying, about things as different as a cathedral and a sonnet, a statue and a symphony. But it is well to be clear what Aristotle really means here by *mimesis*, of which "representation" is a juster rendering than "imitation." For that there is no question here merely of such mechanical imitations as waxworks or photographs, is sufficiently clear from Aristotle's curious statement elsewhere that music is a particularly representative art.[1] Clearly the vibrations of catgut are in themselves very little like the embrace of lovers; sculptors and painters can "imitate" that far more closely, if they choose. But Aristotle is thinking of music's peculiar power of exciting in us artificially the emotions of real life. Thus certain music made Mr Boswell feel that he longed to rush into the thickest of the battle ("Sir," said Dr Johnson, "if it made me feel such a fool, I should never hear it"). Similarly, de Quincey suggested that though no one actually whistled at Waterloo, it might be quite possible to "whistle Waterloo" in a way that would bring back the fierce excitement of its charges. And to avoid mis-

[1] *Politics* v. (viii.) 5. 1340A; *cf.* Plato, *Republic*, 399A; *Laws*, 668A. The Greek word is certainly used loosely and in the sense also of realistic reproduction; but not *only* in that sense, as has sometimes been assumed.

understanding, it is important to realise that by a "representation" of life Aristotle meant something like this, and not mere imitation of its phenomena, with live camels on the stage and all the machines and upholsterers of Drury Lane. To such crude realism the best answer is that made long ago by the Spartan to the man who came to Lacedæmon professing to counterfeit the nightingale to the life: "I had rather hear a real nightingale." It is feelings, not appearances, that we set out to recapture—emotions like those of life, and yet unlike. And that can only be done by means sufficiently like life, and also sufficiently unlike. All this seems incredibly obvious; yet as we look back on the history of the English stage for the last two hundred years, its ruling passion seems to have been to achieve by ever greater realism an end which cannot possibly be reached, and would be fatal if it were—a complete illusion of reality. James Bruce, says Hegel, once showed a Turk a picture of a fish that he had painted. "Are you not afraid," replied the Turk, "that this fish will rise up against you at the Last Day and denounce you for having created a body without a soul?" A similar question might well have been asked of most of the theatre-managers of the last two centuries.

"Tragedy," to return to Aristotle's definition, "is a representation of an action." Again, how simple! But stay, what exactly constitutes "action"? How much should there be? We remember the differing definitions by which later critics have sought more precision, Brunetière's insistence on "conflict" as the one essential, Archer's on "crisis." We see looming in the future those revolts against the tyranny of action, Maeterlinck's Static Drama, Shaw's Discussion Play. And we come to realise how surely and steadily during the centuries between Marlowe and Tchekov the "action" of Tragedy has passed from outside the characters to within them, from the boards to the theatre of the soul, so that at last the whole difference between action and passion tends to fade away. There is no need to dwell on these issues; the point for the moment is simply to illustrate how many questions Aristotle's definition raises.

"An action that is *serious*"—the Greek word (σπουδαίας) means "that matters," "that is worth troubling about." Here too lurks an ancient quarrel—what *is* in fact serious enough for the dignity of tragedy? We hear again the angry invectives of Aristophanes denouncing Euripides for bringing beggars and lovers on the stage of Dionysus;

Sidney's strictures on the indecorum "in majestical matters" of that popular drama from which Shakespeare was to spring; the outcries of Racine's enemies at his indecency in making an Emperor hide behind a curtain or calling a dog a dog in tragedy; the invincible disgust of Coleridge and Sarcey at the Porter in *Macbeth*; and the wail of more modern critics over the "parochial" dinginess of Ibsen's world.

Tragedy, once more, represents "an action which is complete in itself": but then what constitutes completeness? Here lies already the apple of discord between Classic and Romantic, between the completeness of *Antony and Cleopatra* and the differing completeness of *Bérénice*. And then, again, there is that more modern view which rejects the ideal of completeness altogether in favour of *une tranche de vie*.

"Expressed in speech made beautiful"—this too is changed to-day, when our playwrights wrestle above the grave of the verse drama with the question whether even the prose of their predecessors is not too stylised and beautiful to represent a world where people speak without any style at all.

"Acted, not recited"—but this is not strictly true even of Greek tragedy. Not everything permits

itself to be acted. "Let not Medea slay her sons before the audience"; things like that, at least, on the Greek stage were relegated to a Messenger's Speech. They were too horrible to show. And here again opens the gulf between Sophocles and Shakespeare, between Webster and Racine—precisely how much shall be enacted, how much related? What is too horrible? The Unities, too, lurk here in ambush—are we to perform or to recite what happened three days ago, ten miles away?

And so, last of all, we come to the famous statement of the final end of Tragedy—that Purgation or "*Catharsis*" of the emotions, so glibly bandied about by the journalists of all ages, so endlessly misunderstood, so uncritically assumed to be true.

Enough has been said to show what a cockpit of criticism this memorable definition of tragedy has been, ever since the *Poetics* came back to the world at the Renaissance—to bring certainty and salvation at last, as men fondly dreamed, to an art long lost in darkness and decay. It was a false dream; here are no questions to be begged; they must be wrestled with. And that in the pages that follow we shall try to do.

To-day if we tried to remould the definition of Aristotle it would run, perhaps, simply like this:

"Serious drama is a serious representation by speech and action of some phase of human life." If there is an unhappy ending, we may call it a tragedy; but if the play is a serious attempt to represent life, it makes no great difference whether or no good fortune intervenes at the end of Act V. Can we say more? This bare tautology is all that really remains of Aristotle's famous formula. The rest of his stipulations, though all of them have still some force, have all been broken at some time or other. The seriousness of Tragedy has become mingled with comic relief; the ideals of completeness, of beauty of language and metre, of purgation by pity and fear—all these have been successfully challenged in their turn. But though Aristotle's laws have been broken, their history is the history of the growth of Tragedy.

II

THE EMOTIONAL EFFECT OF TRAGEDY

The immense controversy, carried on in books, pamphlets, sheets, and flying articles, mostly German, as to what it was that Aristotle really meant by the famous words in the sixth chapter of the *Poetics*, about tragedy accomplishing the purification of our moods of pity and sympathetic fear, is one of the disgraces of the human intelligence, a grotesque monument of sterility.—JOHN MORLEY, *Diderot.*

IN discussing Aristotle's definition of Tragedy, perhaps the last clause had better be taken first—his statement that its function is to purge away our excess emotions. For the other clauses are concerned with the means by which Tragedy attains its end; and we cannot really discuss the means until we are clear about the end itself. What is indeed the function of Tragedy? This, for instance, is what it offered to an Elizabethan audience.

> The rawish dank of clumsy winter ramps
> The fluent summer's vein; and drizzling sleet
> Chilleth the wan bleak cheek of the numb'd earth,
> Whilst snarling gusts nibble the juiceless leaves
> From the nak'd, shudd'ring branch; and pills the skin

From off the soft and delicate aspects.
O now, methinks, a sullen, tragic scene
Would suit the time with pleasing congruence. . . .
Therefore, we proclaim,
If any spirit breathes within this round,
Uncapable of weighty passion
(As from his birth being huggèd in the arms,
And nuzzled 'twixt the breasts of happiness),
Who winks and shuts his apprehension up
From common sense of what men were and are,
Who would not know what men must be—let such
Hurry amain from our black-visaged shows:
We shall affright their eyes. But if a breast
Nail'd to the earth with grief, if any heart
Pierc'd through with anguish pant within this ring;
If there be any blood whose heat is choked
And stifled with true sense of misery;
If ought of these strains fill this consort up—
Th' arrive most welcome.

(MARSTON, Prologue to *Antonio's Revenge*.)

Here is a curious way, surely, of enjoying an afternoon. Confronted with such a performance an impartial stranger from another planet might well exclaim: "You groan perpetually about the ills and woes of your life on earth. You have reason. But why, in the moments when you are not actually suffering, do you choose to go and suffer in imagination?" And the late Mr Walkley with admirable suavity would have answered for humanity in the

classic words of the definition we have quoted: "As Aristotle has said, in order that by pity and fear we may effect the *Catharsis* or purgation of such emotions."

So Aristotle has said, and that has long sufficed. Indeed the *Catharsis* does yeoman service still: if we dislike A's poem or B's play, we need only say impressively that they fail to produce "the right cathartic effect." It is much simpler than giving reasons. So it was that the professor silenced the fishwife by calling her an isosceles triangle. Let us consider, however, first what Aristotle really meant; and secondly, whether what he meant is sound.

There has been age-long controversy about Aristotle's meaning, though it has almost always been accepted that whatever he meant was profoundly true. Thus Lessing rendered *Catharsis* as "purification." In real life, he explained, men are sometimes too much addicted to pity or fear; sometimes too little; tragedy brings them back to a virtuous and happy mean. Pity is good, but to be sorry for ourselves or harrowed by the death of a lap-dog may be a bad state of mind. Tragedy is the corrective. Others, again, have suggested that our pity and fear were purified in the theatre by

becoming disinterested. It is bad to be selfishly sentimental, timid, and querulous; but it is good to pity Othello or to fear for Hamlet. In the latest jargon, our selfish emotion has been "sublimated."

Neither of these interpretations, however, while they have their truth, is what Aristotle means. To begin with, *Catharsis* does not mean "purification," but "purgation." It is a definitely medical metaphor—a metaphor of an aperient. And this difference of metaphor will turn out to be more important than might appear. Secondly, it is not the passions that are purged of their impurities; it is the human soul that is purged of its excessive passions. It is necessary to dogmatise about this, because it is a matter of Greek scholarship which cannot be argued in detail here. As so often the light we need to understand the great writers of Greece is to be found in their decadent successors centuries later. And Aristotle's meaning becomes clearer when we find Proclus writing (*in Plat. Remp.*, i. 42 (Kroll); see Bywater's ed. of the *Poetics*, pp. 94, 152 ff.): "Tragedy and comedy . . . contribute to the cleansing away of the passions, which cannot be altogether repressed, nor on the other hand safely indulged, but need some moderate out-

let. This they obtain at such dramatic performances, and so leave us untroubled for the rest of the time."

This is a simple view and doubly familiar in an age of psycho-analysis. Tragedy is simply a means of getting rid of repressions.

> All her maidens watching said,
> "She must weep or she will die."

In order to live tolerably we must be able to control the passions that struggle within us; but it will be easier and less harmful to control them when we must, if we give them a harmless outlet when we may. We can assume, though Aristotle's theory of Comedy is lost, that it was the twin of this; and that as Tragedy in Aristotle's view rids us of excessive pity and fear, Comedy performs the same service for less polite emotions, both the malice, the *Schadenfreude*, which makes us desire to abuse and ridicule our neighbours, and also the appetites of sex, "the good gross earth" at the roots of human nature. The comic festivals of Athens, like the Roman Saturnalia and the medieval Feast of Fools, gave an outlet to all the Rabelais in man. And after witnessing in the work of Aristophanes and his fellow-dramatists a wild whirl of bawdry and

abuse, after seeing Cleon basted or Lysistrata triumphant, cobbler and lamp-maker went home to live as decent and law-abiding citizens of Athens till the next festival came round. Similarly in Tragedy those other emotions which, perpetually repressed, might have made man sentimental and hysterical, are given a periodic outlet. This, then, is the famous theory of the *Catharsis*, so long and widely accepted, so often quoted, less often understood. Is it true? It is certainly very odd. Let us lay aside for the moment both our familiarity with the idea and our reverence for the writer, and think. Suppose one asked some queue-waiter: "Why are you standing two and a half hours in the rain to see this thing? Is it that you need your emotions purged?" In the words of Hamlet, "For you to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into far more choler." Or suppose we said: "I have not wept properly for three months, so to-night I shall relieve my pent-up feelings by going to *The Garden of Allah*"; should we expect to be taken seriously? But, it may be answered, the function of Tragedy might quite well be what Aristotle says, without the average spectator being aware of it. Aristotle is speaking as a moralist and legislator. The attraction of Tragedy may be that

appropriate pleasure,[1] which, as Aristotle himself says, it is also its business to give; but the actual effect of tragedy may none the less be this purgation of pity and fear. Has not Milton put this very doctrine into the closing lines of *Samson Agonistes*?—

> His servants He with new acquist
> Of true experience from this great event
> With peace and consolation hath dismist
> And calm of mind, *all passion spent.*

And so again in Manoah's parting words:

> Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
> Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair
> And what may *quiet* us in a death so noble.

In the same way in Greek tragedy in general we may note how the tension is carefully relaxed as the play draws near its end, so that the violent "curtain" of modern drama is a thing which has no counterpart there—not merely because the Greeks had no curtain to fall, like the blade of a

[1] In *Poetics*, xiv. 2 and xxvi. 7, Aristotle speaks explicitly of the appropriate "pleasure" of tragedy; and in *Politics* v. (viii.), 7, 1342A, he implies that the *Catharsis* is a pleasurable process. Besides this, there is the pleasure which he says men take in imitations of real life. But it remains noteworthy that in his great definition he speaks only of moral effects; whereas to-day we think almost exclusively of the pleasure we derive from literature.

guillotine, but because they preferred to close on a quiet note.

Yet we need not feel that these reasons amount to very much. That Milton has translated Aristotle's doctrine does not prove it true; that Greek tragedies end calmly does not prove that calm was their object.

> Calm's not life's crown, though calm is well.

The one test is experience—our own and that of others, so far as we can discover it. And will anyone not besotted by the authority of Aristotle seriously argue either that we do value or that we ought to value *Hamlet* primarily as a means of getting rid of excess emotions? This is what Aristotle meant—this and not any vague prettification of the theory that may have been read into his words by later critics. And yet if we could go down to the dead and question the great dramatists of the past what Tragedy meant to them, they would give us some one answer, some another; but would any single one of them, except Milton perhaps, echo Aristotle? Men have written to please; they have written to impress; they have written because they must; but to purge? Calm of mind may be the mood that often follows reading or

seeing *Œdipus* or *Othello*—the not unpleasant calm of emotional exhaustion. Though even this calm is only partly due to any purgation, partly also to that philosophic detachment which comes from watching with the aloofness of ghosts or gods the feverish struggles of humanity. We stand back from the picture of life and see it steadily and whole. But is this calm the one state of mind which Tragedy must give—so essential, as to be alone mentioned in its standard definition; so essential, that if we leave the theatre feeling angry, or exalted, or more deeply compassionate than when we entered it, the tragedy has failed? It is perfectly possible that for sentimental and hysterical people the *Agamemnon* or *Lear* might have the excellent effect of liberating their too facile emotions and giving them more restraint in their daily life. But is this either common or important? The theatre is not a hospital. And when we consider the human beings we know, do they in fact seem labouring under this excess of violent passions? Such a theory of Tragedy may have been truer for an excitable Mediterranean race; to us phlegmatic dwellers under northern skies there often seems far more need of something to excite our emotions than to relieve them, to stir up the stagnant pool rather than to give

outlet to any pent-up flood of feelings surging within us.

And yet if this time-honoured doctrine of the *Catharsis* is really so baseless, how did the insight of Aristotle ever come to put it forward? This too needs explanation. To understand Aristotle's theory, we must understand two other things—the Greek view of life, and Plato's.

Ever since man began to reason as well as to desire, he has been eternally tormented by the conflict within him between the spirit and the flesh. What is to be done with the passions? "Subdue them by abstinence" has been the answer of the ascetic, of Plato and the Stoics, of Buddha and of Christ. "Govern them by reasonable indulgence" was the instinctive reply of the Greek and the reasoned conclusion of Aristotle. It may be better to enter heaven maimed than not at all; but how loathsome to be maimed! "Into Paradise go these same old priests, and halt old men and maimed, who all day and night cower continually before the altars, and in the crypts; and such folk as wear old amices and old clouted frocks, and naked folk and shoeless, and covered with sores, perishing of hunger and thirst, and of cold, and of little ease. These be they that go into Paradise, with them have I

naught to make." In that cry of Aucassin the Hellene lives again. For in the clear air of that smaller, less complicated Greek world we see this problem, like so many others, sharply set and answered. There, face to face, stand arrayed the opposite ideals—Apollo and Dionysus, the god of the Dorian discipline and the god of the licence of the wild. Yet both are Greek, both reasonable: and instead of burning the votaries of Dionysus at the stake, when he came storming on a wave of enthusiasm from the fastnesses of Thrace, the priests of Apollo gave his untamed younger brother, the son no less of Zeus, a share in Apollo's temple beneath the twin crags of Delphi. That reconciliation is the symbol of the typical Greek attitude, their clear thinking, their good sense—"nothing too much," not even righteousness. They had learned the priceless secret of casting out devils by Beelzebub; and when the nurse urges Phædra in the *Hippolytus* that over-scrupulousness is not for man, that the beam which bears the heavy roof must needs sag out of perfect straightness, she is, though a devil, quoting a Greek scripture. And if Phædra's looseness brings disaster, so also does the over-strictness of Hippolytus himself. Such, in brief, is the Hellenic view of life, which has so long done battle

with the opposite creed of the Hebrew in our civilisation: it is not our business here to decide between them, but to understand.

Into this Greek world, however, was born a great man, who only half belonged to it, Plato. In him appear that hunger and thirst for righteousness, that sense of sin, that need for dogma—a sort of philosophic sacerdotalism—which seem to us not typically Greek, because in Greece though present they failed to win the upper hand. As he grew older these things grew stronger in him, until he became the transcendent paradox we know, a supreme artist denouncing art as wicked. Art, he cried, is bad because it is but the imitation of an imitation of the eternally existent reality; poetry is bad because it tells lies, and fails to teach men that the world is a place of perfect justice; and it is again bad because it encourages the emotions. And so poets are banished without mercy from his ideal Republic. "The natural hunger for weeping and lamentation, which we keep under control in our own hours of unhappiness, is just what your poets gratify and indulge." [1] "Poetry feeds and waters the passions, weeds that ought rather to be killed by drought." And among the different kinds of

[1] *Republic*, 606A.

poetry drama is particularly bad because the actors, in representing the characters of others, destroy their own. The long Puritan attack on the stage has begun—part of that larger effort of those who see all things as either right or wrong, either white or black, to wash out the colour from the world.

Now it is this attitude of his master's that Aristotle is here concerned to answer, though without ever mentioning that master's name. "Art," Plato had said, "is a pale shadow twice removed from reality." "Fiction," retorted Aristotle, "is more philosophic than the history of actual events." "Poetry," said Plato, "encourages men to be hysterical and uncontrolled." "On the contrary," answers his pupil, "it makes them less, not more, emotional, by giving a periodic and healthy outlet to their feelings." In short, Aristotle's definition is half a defence. This reply is indeed only part of Aristotle's general reaction from Plato—"kicking out like a colt at its mother"—his reversion to the normal Greek attitude; but we need not pursue that reaction further here. Aristotle's insistence on what seems to us an insignificant feature of tragedy is, in brief, to be explained as an ingenious piece of special pleading. He stands in the position of a person arguing with a fanatical Puritan about wine

or dancing. The advocate of moderate indulgence is naturally driven to plead that wine is good medicinally and dancing as exercise; but this does not alter the fact that men do not really desire the wine when it is red, as medicine, and that only a Socrates dances alone in his house for exercise. Similarly, the theory of the *Catharsis*, without being an adequate account of the moral effect of tragedy, is a far too moral account of its effect; largely because Aristotle is answering Plato, but partly also because Aristotle himself, as we shall find elsewhere in the *Poetics*, suffers from the excessive preoccupation of all ancient criticism with morality. This, then, seems to me the truth about the famous doctrine of the *Catharsis*: to others Aristotle's view still seems one of the profoundest axioms of all time.[1] The reader must judge for himself.

But the question remains, even if Aristotle has not answered it. Why do men trouble to write and act and watch plays which even if they do not end in unhappiness are full of agony and disaster? Why

[1] Amid the uncritical acquiescence of most critics an honourable exception is to be found in Fontenelle (*Réflexions sur la Poétique*, xlv.): "Je n'ai jamais entendu la purgation des passions par le moyen des passions mêmes; ainsi je n'en dirai rien. Si quelqu'un est purgé par cette voie-là, à la bonne heure; encore ne vois-je pas trop bien à quoi il peut être bon d'être guéri de la pitié."

do we try to make seem as real as possible things that if real would be unbearable? If we asked the dramatists in Elysium—unless Tragedy is there a clean forgotten thing—their answers, we may be sure, would widely disagree. What was Tragedy to Æschylus? A means of uttering his exultation in human greatness and heroism, his troubled groping to find the gods behind the gods, the hidden springs of the justice of the world. And to Sophocles? Sophocles might answer us, as in the old story he answered the court that tried him on his son's charge of senility, by reading one of his choruses —not, as then, the chorus of the *Œdipus at Colonus* in praise of Athens, but that other chorus from the *Antigone*, of which the theme is the marvellousness of man. For him, we feel, that was the one great thing: but not for Euripides, driven by that gnawing hunger for truth which troubles beauty, furrowing with thought the lines upon her face; angered to sting his hearers as well as to please them; struggling always not to purge them of over-pity, but to teach them more. And Shakespeare? His feeling we may fancy much the same as that of Sophocles; and *Hamlet* might answer *Antigone* with its echo of the same cry—"What a piece of work is man!" With Racine, a different and self-conscious

theory finds expression in the preface to *Phèdre*: there he speaks as though he loved the Tragic muse less as a mistress than as a school-mistress; and yet we should never have guessed it from his work. Phèdre as a drunken helot! We feel only the pity of it; and the failure of the moralist is the triumph of the tragedian. Then if we turn last to a dramatist who seems far more purposeful and propagandist than Racine and more like Euripides, we shall find Ibsen on the contrary affirming that his aim is to be an artist above all. We might search farther but we should only find the same disagreement, in theory, among those who have written tragedy; and in practice, among them all the same passionate interest—their one common feeling—not in purgations, but in human beings.

Pass from the poets to the philosophers and the critics. They will answer us with none of the uncertainty or the brevity of the poets; they know the end and function of tragedy without the shadow of a doubt. Unfortunately they all disagree. To begin with, a mass of criticism from ancient almost to modern times has taken the simple view that poetry gives moral lessons. In the eyes of Aristophanes, Hesiod taught men husbandry, Homer war, Æschylus courage to die for one's country; even

to Dr Johnson Shakespeare, like Euripides, remained a treasury of political and moral philosophy.[1] But to-day when Homer's tactics are out of date and Shakespeare is attacked for his want of original ideas, we have grown to expect, not to be instructed by poetry, but to enjoy it. Pleasure has come to be the admitted end of art: men write tragedy and read it because they like it, and there is an end of the matter. But there remains the psychological problem—why do they like it? And over this the theorists quarrel even more.

Thus there are those who, like Rousseau,[2] assert the pleasure of watching a tragedy to be largely sadistic and malicious—the laughter of comedy being but the same malice in another form. The theatre is in fact only the amphitheatre a little refined and disguised, and tragedy combines the attractions of a Mass and a gladiatorial show. We still enjoy, on this theory, watching torture—*cela fait toujours passer une heure ou deux.* In the same way certain of the early Fathers set high among the amenities of heaven the excellent view enjoyed by

[1] John Dennis is particularly explicit: "Every tragedy ought to be a very solemn lecture, inculcating a particular providence, and showing it plainly protecting the good and chastising the bad."

[2] *Lettre sur les Spectacles.*

the faithful of the torments of the damned. On the other side are those who assert the pleasure of tragedy to be on the contrary, if I may be forgiven the jargon, not sadistic, but masochistic; that is to say, we enjoy, not seeing others hurt, but being hurt ourselves; just as the tongue may relish a bitter taste. Tragedy is a luxury of sorrow. There is no need to dwell on these blankly opposite views. We cannot say that, in the complexity of human nature, there may not be some grain of truth in both. It is, indeed, too common in discussions like this to dismiss explanations as utterly false because they clearly do not give the whole truth, and to assume that there must be one answer and only one. But as an account of the general effect produced by *Hamlet* these theories are too grotesque to need further discussion.

Next we turn to Hume.[1] In part he accepts the explanation of the Abbé Dubos, that we go to tragedies because it is pleasanter to be grieved than bored; in part also that of Fontenelle,[2] who argued that the difference between a painful and a pleasant emotion is often merely one of degree. Thus a gentle movement will tickle pleasantly where the same movement more violently performed would

[1] *Essays*: "Of Tragedy." [2] *Réflexions sur la Poétique*, xxxvi.

hurt. At a play we know that it is only a play, and that knowledge sufficiently weakens our emotions to make what would in real life have been painful, become pleasant. Hume recognised a measure of truth in both these views; but he finds them, as well he might, inadequate. There is too, he urges, the pleasure we feel in the activity of the imagination as it mirrors life. And we feel that pleasure all the more intensely when it is one of the intenser sides of life that is so mirrored. Thus the devastation of Sicily by Verres, to take Hume's own example, was not a fiction, but had actually occurred, and yet the very extent of the calamity made Cicero's hearers all the more responsive to the eloquence of the Verrine Orations which denounced the tyrant. The terrible becomes pleasant in the theatre, said Fontenelle, simply because its effect is weakened by our sense of its unreality; the imaginative beauty of the play moves us so intensely, replied Hume, just because the subject is terrible. We might put it thus: to Fontenelle the pleasure of watching a tragedy is like being tickled with a dagger; for Hume, our emotion at being tickled with a dagger is intensified when we are told that it is the dagger which has killed a king.

Here too, we may feel, is truth. Antony does

indeed first lay bare the wounds of the bleeding Cæsar that his great speech may go home. His eloquence would have been wasted on a row of philosophers. But perhaps Hume tends to think a little too much of the part played in Tragedy by eloquence, to be too dazzled by the jewelled words on the finger of the Tragic Muse to see quite steadily the Muse herself. For there are times when she abdicates her purple altogether; times when she has worn the rags of Telephus, the plain petticoat of Hedwig Ekdal. There are tragedies in prose, even prosaic prose.

Then there is Hegel,[1] who, happy man, lived in a purely rational and ideal world, a Heaven which was, however, seemingly divided like the House of Beelzebub against itself; whence the apparent tragedies of human life—yet tragedies only apparent. For all such discords, we are told, merge in a higher harmony at last. Hegel's great example (it squared so well with his theory that he pronounced it the grandest work of ancient or modern times) was the *Antigone*. Creon, King of Thebes, had forbidden the burial of Polynices, slain in arms against his country. The dead man's sister Antigone, preferring the laws of God to those of man, buries him

[1] *Æsthetik* (*Werke*, Berlin, 1843, x. (3), 527 ff).

notwithstanding and is put to death; but not unavenged, for the same fate overtakes the son and the queen of Creon, leaving him miserable upon a lonely throne. Both king and maiden were right, said Hegel; but they were also both wrong, because not right enough—too one-sided in their righteousness. Therefore they suffer; but the justice of God is done. That pity, however, which was for Aristotle the very essence of tragedy, is for Hegel merely an insult to the tragic hero or heroine. Their greatness is above our ignorant compassion. They cannot accept more than our general sympathy; for they know that to each his desert is given, and whatever is, is well. Other examples of such a conflict in which righteousness is opposed to righteousness, were found by Hegel in the plays which deal with Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter to the cause of Greece at Aulis, or with Orestes' murder of his mother to avenge his sire; and he points out that in the latter instance or, again, in the tale of Philoctetes, the crowning reconciliation occurs, not by the destruction of the individual, but by compromise or submission. He might also have instanced, with more justice than usual, the Prometheus Trilogy with its two great antagonists, both guilty of excess at first, in the end both reconciled.

Modern Tragedy, on the other hand, Hegel found less satisfactory; that is to say, less Hegelian. It concentrates too much on the individual character, and its final reconciliations are even less easy to describe as a harmonising of lower discords in a higher unity.

Such a theory of Tragedy needs no detailed discussion. It is based almost wholly on Greek tragedy. Yet it begins with a travesty of the *Antigone*; it goes on to ignore play after play of Æschylus and Sophocles, and it leaves out altogether Euripides "the most tragic of the poets." It is easy enough to talk glibly of reconciliation and harmony over the dead bodies on the tragic stage. It may be true that the cry of the blood of Agamemnon is satisfied at last with revenge, that Œdipus comes to rest in a glorious grave in quiet Colonus, that Heracles ascends to sit on the right hand of Zeus; but can we suppose that to Cassandra, to Jocasta, to Dejanira all seemed to end so pleasantly in a pink sunset of satisfaction? Does the world of tragedy or the tragedy of the world really bear any relation to this Universe squirted with philosophic rose-water? It is an astonishing conception. Many another Dr Pangloss has endeavoured to make mankind swallow the world like a pill by coating it with sugar, but only Hegel sought his syrup in the heart of tragedy

itself. When the philosopher's Sunday joint was set smoking before him, we are told that Hegel used to observe: "Come now, let us fulfil its destiny"; but few of us will find much comfort as Phædra, or Deirdre passes before us to her death, in "cette doctrine d'oie qu'une oie a pour devoir d'être un rôti." For Hegel the mere pity for misfortune, that Virgilian tenderness which cried, "Sunt lacrimæ rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt," that compassion which to Anatole France seemed to lie at the very root of the world's great literature—for Hegel this was the emotion of "country-cousins." It is strange to reflect, remembering Bacon also, how pinched a soul may reside under the mantle of a great philosopher; and yet even Bacon wrote, "The nobler a soul is, the more objects of compassion it hath." In a Utopia peopled by Hegels tragedy might perhaps be what he describes, but that is no concern of ours. His attempt to force his philosophy down the throat of Tragedy as we know it, serves only to provide one more instance of the rashness of metaphysicians who venture into regions where their speculations can for once be checked.

Schopenhauer[1] on the other hand saw Tragedy,

[1] *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Eng. trans. by Haldane and Kemp, 7th ed., i. 326–330; iii. 212–219).

like the world it represents, in a very different light. For him the gospel of life is "vanity of vanities"; and tragedies are its parables. When the Chorus of Sophocles cries that it is best never to be born; when the Macaria of Euripides exclaims against the idea of an immortality which would prolong life's agony beyond the peace of death; when Macbeth sees revealed in the white and ghastly light of imminent death the blank futility of all existence; when Webster cries—

> Pleasure of life, what is't? Only the good houres
> Of an Ague;

at such moments [1] Schopenhauer would recognise with calm satisfaction a reflection and a confirmation of his own vision of the world. And so he came, unreasonably but naturally, to regard such reflections as the great end of Tragedy. We should go home from a play, he thought, having realised more clearly than ever the worthlessness of life, freer than ever from that will to live which comedy on the contrary encourages.

[1] He himself instances the end of Voltaire's *Mahomet* where the dying Palmire cries to the Prophet: "Tu dois régner; le monde est fait pour les tyrans."

Ay, look: high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation.
All thoughts to rive the heart are here, and all are vain:
Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation—
Oh, why did I awake? when shall I sleep again?

This view of Schopenhauer's is certainly far nearer the truth than Hegel's. And it is clear enough that Tragedy, especially in the narrower modern sense of plays with an unhappy ending, is often deeply pessimistic, at least in implication. For we should feel that our emotions had been wrung from us on false pretences if a choir of angels descended at the close of *Lear* to carry off the old man and his daughter into eternal felicity. The Tragic Muse was born of religion, but she has always remained something of an infidel; at least her gods have been as remote and unhelpful as those of Epicurus, except when they have appeared, not to great advantage, in machines. The spectator of drama, says Coleridge, requires a suspension of disbelief; the religious spectator of tragic drama requires also a suspension of belief. That seldom seems to present much difficulty; but the Church has not readily forgotten or forgiven it. When, however, Schopenhauer implies that tragedies preach, or at all events that tragedies teach, resignation and contempt of life,

we cannot follow him. After all it would be extremely odd if the tragic dramatists of the world all turned out to have been Schopenhauerians in spite of themselves. This feeling of resignation is certainly sometimes the effect of tragedy. "You see that these things must be accomplished thus," says Marcus Aurelius, "and even those endure them who cry out 'O Cithæron!'"[1] But if we had to find a phrase for the mood most generally induced by great tragedy, it would certainly not be resignation nor contempt of existence. Life seems at such times infinitely sad, but not worthless; infinitely fragile, yet never more intensely ours. Schopenhauer, indeed, admits that this resigned attitude is not common, even at the end of Greek Tragedy, and explains it by saying that the Greek dramatists were undeveloped; but this is sheer suicide for his whole theory. To pretend that the tragedy of Æschylus and Sophocles "has not yet attained to the summit and goal of tragedy" is merely to admit defeat oneself; nor for that matter does modern drama, either, afford many happy examples of his theory.

On Schopenhauer follows Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche the essence of tragedy is not simple disillusion, but alternate illusion and dis-

[1] A reference, of course, to the *Œdipus Tyrannus*.

illusion. The vision of Apollo builds up before us a heroic world, sublime, magnificent, rejoicing in its splendid individuality.

> A brighter Hellas rears its mountains
> From waves serener far;
> A new Peneus rolls its fountains
> Against the morning star.

But with this Apolline vision is combined the wild, self-annihilating rapture of the music of Dionysus. From that tragedy sprang, and in that each tragedy dies away, while the power and the glory and the glamour of this heroic world dissolve in the end ecstatically back to airy nothing. The individual, whom Apollo had bidden above all to know himself, here loses himself once more, and rejoices to be lost, in the vast onward Dionysian sweep of life—so ruthless, so exultant, so like a child (said Heraclitus, remembering Homer), building and then overturning its sand-castles on the shore. So a dead leaf might be imagined to rejoice for one final moment when it is torn at last from its twig and whirled away by the year's first south-west gale that shouts of the coming spring.

> E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

Such seems to be Nietzsche's meaning; but it is

impossible to be more precise. For to try to understand him is like listening for a coherent answer among the oak groves of Dodona in a hurricane. His book is written in one long intoxication, prefaced by later amendments hardly soberer. When philosophy goes so far, instead of criticising poetry, it becomes it. But is this, after all, what we go to see in Hamlet—Hamlet who is for Nietzsche the Dionysian man awakened from his visions to see the paralysing futility of life? Yes, sometimes, to some extent. But how complicated, how arbitrary, how constricted such a theory is! Why will the philosophers try to herd the poets, like sheep, all into one narrow pen? Nietzsche's view has indeed this merit, that it sees the effect of tragedy not as a simple thing, but a struggle of opposing feelings—our sense of the splendour and of the despair of human life. But if we questioned the average spectator of tragedy more closely than this, whether he recognised really Nietzsche's description in his own emotions, his answer would not, I think, be very satisfactory: to which Nietzsche would reply that it was because his taste was debauched. But that is no very helpful conclusion.

Lastly we may mention another very different theory of an equilibrium between opposing forces,

the suggestion of Mr I. A. Richards.[1] "What clearer instance," he writes, "of the 'balance or reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities' can be found than Tragedy? Pity, the impulse to approach, and Terror, the impulse to retreat, are brought in Tragedy to a reconciliation which they find nowhere else, and with them who knows what other allied groups of equally discordant impulses? Their union in an ordered single response is the *catharsis* by which Tragedy is recognised, whether Aristotle meant anything of this kind or not. This is the explanation of that sense of release, of repose in the midst of stress, of balance and composure, given by Tragedy, for there is no other way in which such impulses, once awakened, can be set at rest without suppression."

We may say at once that this is certainly not what Aristotle meant. That, of course, is no proof that it is not true. But I find it difficult to recognise in experience anything like this tug-of-war between the impulse to approach and the impulse to retreat, which is supposed to keep the tragic spectator suspended, like Mahomet's coffin, between earth and heaven, between equal and opposite desires to rush forward to the footlights and back to the exit. Are

[1] *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925), p. 245 ff.

these impulses supposed to balance exactly at every instant? But there are so many instants in a tragedy where one feels pity alone, or terror alone, or neither. Or do they balance only in the long run, so that our terror of the Ghost in Hamlet would be set off by our pity for Ophelia, and so on? It would be very odd, surely, if it all worked out so neatly; and very immaterial. Since in such matters it is only possible to speak from one's own experience, I must own that I have seldom felt any impulse at a play to "approach," and had imagined that such feelings were confined to the sort of old gentleman who thunders in the middle of *Othello*—"You great black fool, can't you see it's all right?" And though I have more often felt the impulse to "retreat," it has hardly been due to terror. The theory, doubtless, means something less literal than this by its "approaches" and "retreats"; but however figurative it is made, I do not feel it true. The element of Terror in particular seems overworked in this as in other views of tragedy: in practice Terror is really too subordinate to Pity (to say nothing of interest and the enjoyment of artistic form) to be balanced against it. True, there are moments of terror on the platform at Elsinore or in the castle of Macbeth, but they seem rare to a degree which the present

writer cannot attribute to his own excessive couragousness of disposition.

> 'Tis the eye of childhood
> That fears a painted devil.

Indeed Mr Richards himself seems conscious of some difficulty in applying his view at all widely to tragedy, since he dismisses as "pseudo-tragedy" all the drama of the Greeks, and "almost all Elizabethan tragedy outside Shakespeare's six masterpieces." That is surely rather sweeping. There is a seductive neatness about this theory of an emotional balance of power; but a mere theory it seems to me to remain.

What is, after all, the upshot of this long debate? Is there no simpler answer to the problem? It seems to me a mistake to consider the effect of tragedy in such isolation and apart from the epic and the novel, as if we felt essentially different when we read the death of Hector and of Hamlet, of Desdemona and of Tess of the D'Urbervilles. The function of Tragedy is simply and solely to give a certain sort of pleasure, to satisfy in certain ways our love both of beauty and of truth, of truth to life and about it. Experience, ever more experience is our craving—"Homo sum, nihil humani a me alienum puto." Fortune may starve, and must limit, the

adventures we live through as individuals, but we are free at least to dream. "Life piled on life were all too little"; but at least this imaginary world is there to redress the balance of the real. That is why stories were invented. And since life is often unhappy, so the stories had to be. Even the fairy prince who is to wed the princess and live happily ever after, must suffer first. About the Sleeping Beauty grows the barrier of thorns. Curiosity, the first intellectual emotion of the child, the last of the old man—that is the ultimate base of epic and novel and tragedy alike.

> For all experience is an arch wherethro'
> Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
> For ever and ever when I move.

Life is fascinating to watch, whatever it may be to experience. And so we go to tragedies not in the least to get rid of emotions, but to have them more abundantly; to banquet, not to purge. Our lives are often dull; they are always brief in duration and confined in scope; but here, vicariously, even the being "whose dull morrow cometh and is as to-day is" can experience something more. To be "tragic," however, the experience must have in addition a certain peculiar quality—"must," not for moral or philosophic reasons, but because if the

experience were not of that kind, we should use a different word for it. It is a matter of vocabulary, not of metaphysics. Some other forms of art may be merely beautiful; by Tragedy, I think, we imply also something fundamentally true to life. It need not be the whole truth, but it must be true. Twice at the theatre I can remember having felt in the midst of a play, "Yes, this is the very essence of Tragedy": once, in Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, where the slow disillusionment of years is crowded into one agonised scene and a girl frozen into a woman before our eyes. Were the truth and the beauty of it less perfect, we should feel it less keenly; were they less perfect, we might feel it more keenly than we could bear. As it is, we mutter, "How unbearable!—and yet, yes, that is how it happens, the inevitable change that comes on all of us, made visible here as never before. This is life. This is growing up. How appallingly—how fascinatingly true!" And so again in the work of another Russian, *The Three Sisters* of Tchekov. A series of petty, futile disasters has passed across these women's lives; and now nothing is left, not even anything tragic, only a monotony of hopelessness, like the flapping of burnt paper in an empty grate, as all that had lent meaning to their existence

passes away from them with the music of the departing regiment—that music which goes marching on so gaily, so confidently, as if it at least had no part in these weary doubts and knew whither it was going and why men are born. There is no more tragic ending in all drama; for as we see these wasted figures stand before us, as we hear fife and bugle go dancing so light-heartedly upon their way, in that contrast seems embodied, for one eternal moment, the paradox of the tragedy of life, its hopefulness and its despair, its calling trumpets and its after silences. And here too the only consolation is the utter truthfulness: we have seen for an instant through its mists the sheer mountain-face of life.

So the essence of Tragedy reduces itself to this—the pleasure we take in a rendering of life both serious and true. It must be serious, whether or no it has incidentally comic relief; it must seem to matter, or else the experience would belong to a different category and need a different name. And it must also seem true, or it will not move us. This is all. It may be good for us, but that is not why we go to it. And watching scenes like those of Turgenev, the mind revolts with a sudden anger at the thought of the besetting meanness of philosophers, who can so seldom be disinterested, who make life a reforma-

tory and beauty useful and art a pill. And, again, tragedy may teach us to live more wisely; but that is not why we go to it; we go to have the experience, not to use it.

But is there beyond this no definite attitude to life which we may call tragic, something in fact common to the *Oresteia* and *Othello*, *The Bacchæ* and *The Master Builder*, some common impression, which they leave? Is there in tragedy something corresponding to that fundamental paradox of comedy, which men have seen supremely embodied in Falstaff—the eternal incongruity between the divine wit and the animal grossness of man? The answer is, I think, "Yes." And this paradox of Hamlet which answers that of Falstaff? It is the very same. "What a piece of work is man!" cries the Tragic Muse; and Comedy echoes with a laugh, "What a piece of work!" Nietzsche's tragic antithesis is nearer to the truth than his predecessors' simpler answers. For in tragedy is embodied the eternal contradiction between man's weakness and his courage, his stupidity and his magnificence, his frailty and his strength. It is the transcendent commonplace of Pope:

> Placed on this Isthmus of a middle state,
> A being darkly wise and rudely great;

With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for a Stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt, to act or rest,
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast,
In doubt his mind or body to prefer,
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err . . .
Created half to rise, and half to fall:
Great Lord of all things, yet a Prey to all;
Sole Judge of Truth, in endless error hurl'd;
The Glory, Jest, and Riddle of the world!

That is the theme of Tragedy, and to do it justice is Tragedy's one end and aim. We ask no more. And this tragic presentation of the world is complete in itself, as befits a work of art: the dramatist may be a pessimist like Euripides, or a Jansenist like Racine, or we know not what like Shakespeare. There may be a god out of a machine to come hereafter, a happy epilogue; but *Hamlet* or *Phèdre* call for neither of these; they need nothing to perfect them. They stand alone and we forget the rest—the after-life with its readjustments, the martyr's crown, the lost in their livery of flame. Here is a mirror held up to the fashion of this world; we can look in it and bear to look, without being turned to stone. It is dangerous to generalise too precisely about the spirit of Tragedy; but we can say that there the problem of evil and of suffering is set

before us; often it is not answered, but always there is something that makes it endurable. It may be the thought that the hero, like Samson, has at least got cleanly off the stage.

> Sorrow that is not sorrow, but delight,
> And miserable love that is not pain
> To hear of, for the glory that redounds
> Therefrom to human kind and what we are.

It may be simply the consolation of perfect language, as when Antigone passes with that last great cry down to her living tomb:

> O tomb, O bridal-chamber, prison-house
> Deep-delved, sure guarded ever; whither I
> Pass and am gathered to my kin, all those
> Persephone has numbered with her dead!

Or it may be simply the consolation of the sheer integrity which faces life as it is. The characters may no longer be heroes sublime even in their fall, they may be the ordinary men and women of Ibsen and Tchekov, over whose lack of tragic splendour critics have mourned so needlessly. Complaining of the want of great personalities in this play or that, they forgot the author. For the characters may be poor in spirit and feeble in desire, and the play remain tragic in spite of it, if we feel that the author is himself none of these things and has never cheated

or paltered in his picture of men as they are. Tragedy, then, is a representation of human unhappiness which pleases us notwithstanding, by the truth with which it is seen and the skill with which it is communicated — "l'amertume poignante et fortifiante de tout ce qui est vrai."

The world of everyday seems often a purposeless chaos, a mangy tiger without even the fearful symmetry of Blake's vision; but the world of tragedy we can face, for we feel a mind behind it and the symmetry is there. Tragedy, in fine, is man's answer to this universe that crushes him so pitilessly. Destiny scowls upon him: his answer is to sit down and paint her where she stands.

III

THE ANCIENT CHORUS AND ITS MODERN COUNTERPARTS

If this, then, is the end of Tragedy—so to portray life that its tears become a joy for ever—it remains to consider the various means by which this has been done from Æschylus to Ibsen.

Aristotle finds in Tragedy six essential parts—Plot and Character; Diction and Ideas; the Lyrical or Musical element provided by the Chorus, and the Spectacular. And since, historically, Tragedy begins with song and dance, we may not inappropriately take first this musical element. It has indeed the additional interest of providing an excellent example of the way artistic evolution proceeds. For the Greek Chorus was not a mere luxury; it performed certain functions essential in any drama; and when it disappeared other means had to be found of doing its work. On the other hand it was the Chorus which also bequeathed to modern Europe that rule of the Three Unities which had ceased really to be

essential once the Chorus itself had disappeared, but for generations seemed so. And, lastly, its early predominance and subsequent extinction illustrate excellently that larger process which has been going on since time immemorial, off the stage as well as on it—the struggle of the Individual against the Group, of the One against the Many.

Tragedy begins with a dance of Anons. "Das Volk dichtet," said Grimm of primitive poetry; so here "das Volk tanzt." The individual hero and his heroic individuality are not yet. Exactly what sort of dance it was and what kind of ritual, has been and is a matter of violent controversy, which involves the meaning of the word "tragedy" itself. But we cannot consider here whether it is more probable that tragedy was called a "Goat-Song" because the goat was the emblem of fertility, and the tragic dance was in honour of a dead god on whose resurrection the prosperity of the crops depended; or that tragedy was called a "Goat-Song" because the dancers were primitively dressed in goat-skins, and its ritual served to honour a dead man, on whose propitiation the prosperity of the crops similarly hung. It seems likely enough that both elements were present.

But whatever the origin of the Chorus, the in-

dividual first made his dramatic appearance in the midst of this anonymous ritual when some innovator, Thespis it is said, about the middle of the sixth century B.C., had the idea of impersonating the various characters of the religious story which the dance celebrated in the intervals while his dancers rested. So the first actor appeared. With Æschylus came a second, with Sophocles a third; and at this sacred number of three [1] Greek tragedy mysteriously stopped. With three actors on the stage a complicated drama can be performed, while a statuesque simplicity is still preserved.

It is interesting to watch in the career of Æschylus himself how this battle of the individual with the group sways to and fro. In his first extant play, *The Suppliants*, we have a chorus of the fifty daughters of Danaus, the heroines of the piece: fleeing from the courtship of their fifty cousins, they invoke the protection of Argos and completely cow its king by threatening suicide at his altars should he refuse. In *The Persians* the number fifty has been diminished to a more manageable twelve (increased later to

[1] It is sometimes said that the *Œdipus at Colonus* of Sophocles is exceptional and requires four actors; but here, too, three will suffice. There was, of course, no restriction about employing "supers" in addition; it was the *speaking* parts that were limited.

fifteen): but these Persian elders, though thinned in numbers, remain august figures, full of the pomp and dignity of the gorgeous East and on equal terms with Queen Atosa herself; and when the ghost of King Darius rises like Samuel's at the end, he turns to them before addressing his Queen. Nothing could be further from Oriental servitude. In the next extant play, *The Seven against Thebes*, the Chorus no longer enters first; and when it appears, it consists of a shrieking throng of Theban women, who cower before the contemptuous reproaches of King Eteocles; yet, even so, at the end half of them rebel under the lead of Antigone, when she refuses to leave her dead brother unburied. In the *Prometheus* the nymphs of Ocean have still more clearly sunk to that position of powerless though sympathetic spectators, which is typical of most Greek Choruses; and yet they, too, show character at the end and refuse despite the menaces of Hermes to forsake Prometheus when the earth opens to engulf him. In the *Agamemnon* the degeneration of the Chorus as persons is almost complete; they have become the old men we know so well, the feeble onlookers who wring their hands in helplessness and beat vainly against bolted doors while the murdering axe falls on the neck of the King of Kings; yet even they

defy the usurper Ægisthus at the close. And now in the two plays that follow, the Chorus recovers for a final moment something of its ancient dignity. In the *Choephoræ* and the *Eumenides* it once more gives its name to the play; and in the *Eumenides* the old Æschylus seems to react towards the conventions of his youth and the Chorus rises once more to its supreme height in the figures of the avenging Furies. Yet the Furies in the end are defeated; and there is something very appropriate in their conversion by Athena into benign but shadowy goddesses of goodwill, "beautiful but ineffectual angels." For that is what the Chorus comes to be; until at last it fades out like Echo, and becomes in Euripides at times a mere disembodied voice, and so at last to its final silence. That gradual decline cannot here be traced step by step through the later dramatists, but we can consider in general what services the Greek Chorus performs; what offices, when it dies, it bequeaths to its various inheritors and substitutes. Conventions in Art are born rather than made: like most conventions the Greek Chorus is a beautiful accident, and like most accidents it is not perfect. Superbly as its great dramatists adapt and modify this relic of primitive religion to serve their art, just as Greek sculptors adapt their groups with an added

beauty to the arbitrary triangle of the temple-pediment, there are times when we feel the Chorus an encumbrance and wish it away. On the other hand, the dramatists early realised how many important uses this standing stage-army could be made to serve. It can expound the past, comment on the present, forebode the future. It provides the poet with a mouthpiece and the spectator with a counterpart of himself. It forms a living foreground of common humanity above which the heroes tower; a living background of pure poetry which turns lamentation into music and horror into peace. It provides both a wall, as Schiller held, severing the drama like a magic circle from the real world, and a bridge between the heroic figures of legend and the average humanity of the audience. Thus while we await the returning Agamemnon, the elders of Argos sadly recall how in the past the maiden blood of Iphigenia stained his departure for Troy. When Œdipus forgets the due self-restraint of a Hellene and a king, the elders of Thebes shake their heads in anxious disapproval. And while the bath of Clytemnestra still lies hidden in the future, long before the fatal moment arrives when that clinging purple mantle is to net the struggling king, the recurring idea of a net has haunted the lips of

the Chorus, just as "the pistols of my father the General" are the refrain of *Hedda Gabler*, "the White Horses" the refrain of *Rosmersholm*. Beside the youthful courage of Antigone quaver in trembling contrast the old men of Thebes; from the convulsive passion of Phædra the vision of the women of Trœzen flees away to the untrodden caverns of the hills, the careless freedom of the birds that pass cloud-like from land to land. For this creation of atmosphere, of contrast, of escape and relief the Greek Chorus in the hands of its masters is consummately used.

But the sure change comes. The choric odes that in Sophocles had retained the strict relevance of the music of opera, in Euripides tend to resemble rather the merely diverting music of an *entr'acte*; in Agathon they have become completely disconnected, and the "Orchestra" is well on its way from its ancient sense—"the dancing-place of the chorus"—to its meaning in the theatre of our time. More and more this permanent stage crowd was felt to be a burden on the plot of the dramatist, as well as on the purse of the rich citizen who had to pay for it. The characters of Æschylus had been colossi, and even his choruses of heroic stature; the characters of Sophocles heroic, his choruses simply human; the

characters of Euripides become human, his choruses half ghosts. And finally the dead mummy of the chorus remains embalmed for ever in the neat summary of Horace :[1]

> An actor's part the chorus should sustain
> And do their best to get the plot in train:
> And whatsoe'er between the acts they chant
> Should all be apt, appropriate, relevant.
> Still let them give sage counsel, back the good,
> Attemper wrath, and cool impetuous blood,
> Praise the spare meal that pleases but not sates,
> Justice and law, and peace with unbarred gates,
> Conceal all secrets, and the gods implore
> To crush the proud and elevate the poor.

After this it is only its bare dishevelled ghost that wails between the acts of the tragedies of Seneca.

We come to the Middle Ages. Once more from the tomb of Christ, as before of Dionysus, the drama rises into life; once more what has been a religious ritual becomes art. But no Chorus reappears to dance down the cobbled streets of Coventry or Wakefield. The Middle Ages danced, even in the churchyard itself; but their dance failed to wed their drama. Only when the ancient world was rediscovered did the learned try to recapture the secret of its tragic chorus. But the choruses of

[1] *Ars Poetica*, 193–201 (Conington's translation).

their classical imitations, of *Gorboduc* and *Cornelie*, Fulke Greville and Ben Jonson, remain "vampire-cold." And even when the convention was revived, the process of its decay only repeated itself far more rapidly. After the first attempts to reproduce those Senecan choruses between the acts which preserved at all events some sort of relevance, we find Garnier writing candidly in the preface to his *Bradamante* (1580):

"Parce qu'il n'y a point de chœurs comme aux tragédies précédentes, pour la distinction des actes, celui qui voudroit faire réprésenter cette Bradamante, sera, s'il lui plaît, averti d'user d'entre-mêts, et les interposer entre les actes, pour ne les confondre, et ne mettre en continuation de propos ce qui requiert quelque distance du temps." The choric ode has thus already become again, as in Agathon, a mere interlude. Success lay not in resurrecting the ancient convention, but in inventing other ways of doing what it had done. For if the popular Elizabethan playwright had no chorus, on the other hand he could have on the stage at once not three characters only, but almost as many as he chose. And a single one of these, like Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, might suffice by himself to do much of the work the chorus once performed. Is the past

to be recalled? Enobarbus will describe in poetry as vivid as an ode of Æschylus how Cleopatra first came to the arms of Antony.

I will tell you.
The Barge she sat in, like a burnisht Throne
Burnt on the water: the Poope was beaten Gold,
Purple the Sailes: and so perfumed that
The Windes were Love-sicke with them. The Owers were Silver,
Which to the tune of Flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beate, to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes. For her owne person,
It beggerd all description: she did lye
In her Pavillion, cloth of Gold, of Tissue,
O'er-picturing that Venus, where we see
The fancie outworke Nature. On each side her
Stood pretty Dimpled Boyes, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-coulour'd Fannes whose winde did seem,
To glowe the delicate cheekes which they did coole,
And what they undid did.

Is comment needed on the present? Enobarbus will reflect on the infatuation of his master.

I see men's judgements are
A parcell of their Fortunes, and things outward
Do draw the inward quality after them
To suffer all alike—that he should dreame,
Knowing all measures, the full *Cæsar* will
Answer his emptinesse! *Cæsar*, thou hast subdu'de
His judgement too.

And if a hint of the future is required, Enobarbus can forebode it.

> If I were bound to Divine of this unity, I wold not Prophesie so. . . . You shall find the bande that seemes to tye their friendship together will be the very strangler of their Amity: *Octavia* is of a holy, cold, and still conversation . . . he will to his Egyptian dish againe: then shall the sighes of *Octavia* blow the fire up in *Cæsar*, and (as I said before) that which is the strength of their Amity, shall prove the immediate Author of their variance. *Anthony* will use his affection where it is. Hee married but his occasion heere.

Where the Greek Chorus served as a foil, a type of common humanity beside the heroic figures of legend, the Elizabethan has his meaner characters, his citizens, his crowds, his clowns. Where the Greek Chorus provided its lyric relief of the tragic tension, the Elizabethan has on the one hand the laughter of his fools, and on the other that lyric beauty which both flowers in many a scattered song and is lavished also in God's plenty on all the characters in turn, even the most sordid and the most villainous. There is not a dung-heap in their plays which may not at any moment disclose a sudden pearl.

> All the Flowers of the Spring
> Meet to perfume our burying;

These have but their growing prime,
And man does flourish but his time.
Survey our progress from our birth,
We are set, we grow, we turne to earth.
Courts adieu, and all delights,
All bewitching appetites;
Sweetest Breath, and clearest eye,
Like perfumes goe out and die;
And consequently this is done
As shadows wait upon the Sunne.

Such are the words which Webster chooses to put in the mouth of a swindling usurer (*The Devil's Law-Case*, v. 4). The whole pace of the drama and its multiplicity of detail have increased tenfold. In passing from Sophocles to Shakespeare we seem to turn from the lonely mountain peak to the multitudinous whispers of the forest, from the Parthenon to the innumerable pinnacles of Gothic, from the grey simplicity of the pearl to the thousand facets of the diamond. In the rush of this new world there is only time to glimpse things for a moment as they flash by. Where Dejanira or Polyxena had a whole ode of lamentation for her fate, Desdemona has but her brief Willow-song, Imogen Fidele's dirge, Ophelia her heart-broken snatches of madness. Where Œdipus was warned by the wise deliberations of his Elders, Lear has but the sudden piping of the fool—

Then they for sodaine joy did weepe,
And I for sorrow sung,
That such a King should play bo-peepe,
And goe the Fools among.

Where the old men of Argos slowly unburdened their hearts of dark presentiment, in Richard III. "Enter Three Citizens." In *Hamlet*, again, the work of the ancient Chorus is divided between Horatio, and the gravediggers, and Fortinbras with his healthy commonplaceness, and, above all, Hamlet himself, whose "To be or not to be?" might be a chorus of Euripides, just as his "What a piece of work is man!" actually answers to one of Sophocles. In the obvious difference of the means employed this underlying likeness, this long continuity in the development of the drama, is not always seen.

Since the Elizabethans, however, Tragedy, where it has succeeded at all, has become ever less lyrical and less poetic. The French neo-classic stage austerely denied its audience any lyrical relief; the service of providing both the exposition of the plot and examples of average humanity was left to its confidants. And in modern tragedy the lyric element tends either to disappear altogether as in *Ghosts* or to pervade the whole play as in *La Città Morta* or *Riders to the Sea*. To-day the main

characters are themselves ordinary human beings; therefore they do not need ordinary human beings to contrast with them. And yet even now in curious, isolated figures like Dr Relling and Father Keegan, or the old servants in *Rosmersholm* and *The Cherry Orchard*, we may, if we care, see the disinherited descendants of those who once moved so proudly around Tantalid and Labdacid beneath Athena's hill.

The Chorus is dead. Its music has fallen to opera, that "*beau monstre*"; and even its poetry finds only fitful utterance on the lips of the dwellers in this modern world which loves poetry, indeed, but so seldom succeeds in living it.

IV

PLOT

Pesez ce mot, l'ensemble ; selon qu'on y songe ou non, on entre dans la maturité, ou l'on reste dans l'enfance.—TAINE.

OF the Plot of Tragedy Aristotle makes three general observations: that it must be of a certain size; that it must be of a certain structure; and that it is the most important thing—"the soul"—of drama.

Its size is obviously limited, because it must on the one hand be long enough for the catastrophe to occur, and on the other hand short enough to be grasped as a single artistic whole, and not (an unusual flight of fancy for Aristotle) "like an animal a thousand miles long." In practice on the European stage this has meant a usual length of from two to three hours. The drama has always been less liable to capricious extravagances and changes of fashion than other forms of literature, just as architecture has been less liable to them than the other visual arts; simply because it is too expensive. Artists, or those who finance them, are inevitably more

cautious where there is a risk of wasting not merely a few sheets of paper or feet of canvas, but a whole troop of actors or tons of wood and stone. And so the acting drama has suffered less both from other vagaries and from that elephantiasis which has occasionally afflicted the epic and the novel. The limits set by the logic of Aristotle and the capacity of the ordinary human being to sit still remain decisive; and though this capacity varies to some extent in different times and countries, no more need be said.

Of the structure of tragedy Aristotle has observed, with his usual fine disregard of apparent platitude, that it must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. A "beginning" is a situation which has definite consequences though not very obvious causes; a "middle" is a situation with both causes and consequences; and an "end" is the result of the "middle," but creates no further situation in its turn. Taken literally, since every event has both causes and consequences, this would mean that tragedies must last for eternity; but though they may sometimes seem to, this is not Aristotle's intention. Events tend to occur in clusters. A volcano, even when continuously active, has eruptions which form episodes complete in themselves; and the events of a tragedy are like such an eruption.

All that Aristotle is insisting upon is that a play should have good and obvious reasons for beginning where it begins and ending where it ends; and that its incidents should follow from one another by a clear chain of causation, without coincidence and without irrelevance. There shall be nothing which is not clearly caused by what precedes, nothing which is not clearly the cause of what follows. On the stage of Aristotle no miser "leans against the wall and grows generous"; no British troops arrive by chance to the rescue in the nick of time. On the other hand we shall not have Falstaff. For what is he but a magnificent irrelevance in a play about Henry IV.? And Falstaff may well seem a heavy price to pay for logic. However, this is no place for a detailed history of logic on the stage. The Greeks, with that strange, precocious, artistic instinct they so often show, practised it long before Aristotle was born to make it into a theory; the Elizabethans ignored it—in a few happy instances with triumphant success—as a rule, disastrously; the French learnt it from the ancients and so redoubled its rigour that in such matters La Harpe's little finger is thicker than Aristotle's loins; while finally the modern drama has lost the innocence of the Elizabethans, so that a play as ill constructed as, say, *Henry IV.*

would probably seem a monstrosity to-day, and an Ibsen returns to an almost Greek severity of form, though on the other hand we have finally abandoned the extremer pedantries of neo-classicism.

But to return to Aristotle's "beginning"; we have seen that these apparently elementary statements of his are apt to lend themselves to as startlingly diverse interpretations as the provisions of a simple-seeming will and testament. What is in fact the beginning of the tragedy of Œdipus? To Sophocles the coming of that oracle about the plague, which like a cold breath lifts the corner of the veil that hides the past of Œdipus and Jocasta. And so we have that marvel of construction, the *Œdipus Tyrannus*; which may be rudely anatomised as follows:[1]—

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[1] Greek tragedies were not, of course, divided into Acts: their subdivisions are named with reference to the once all-important Chorus, thus:—

PROLOGOS: the part before the entrance of the Chorus.

PARODOS: entrance-song of Chorus.

EPEISODION: interval between songs of the Chorus; the counterpart (together with the Prologos and Exodos) of our Acts. Their number is not fixed; though by the time of Horace (*Poetics*, 189) who drew on Hellenistic criticism, the sacred number of five Acts has appeared, and this is observed by Seneca.

STASIMON: song of the Chorus (not in trochees or anapæsts). The number of these varies with that of the Epeisodia they separate.

EXODOS: all after the last song of the Chorus.

Act I. The arrival of the oracle about the plague in Thebes, commanding the banishment of the unknown murderer of the late king.

Act II. Investigating the murder, Œdipus, quick-tempered and suspicious, quarrels with Tiresias, the true servant of the gods.

Act III. He quarrels likewise with Creon, the true servant of the State.

Act IV. The Messenger comes from Corinth; Jocasta realises the truth and goes out to hang herself; while Œdipus, misunderstanding all, persists in the inquiry, and the Chorus rashly exults in the hope of discovering that some great, perhaps divine, parentage is his.

Act V. Owing to the revelations of the Messenger, the Herdsman is brought from Cithæron. Œdipus in his turn realises the truth and rushes out to blind himself.

Act VI. Another Messenger announces the self-murder of Jocasta and the self-blinding of Œdipus, who enters and laments his fate, and is then driven into banishment.

Now, had Ibsen treated this story, he would probably have chosen to cover, however differently, the same events, except that he would have ended with Act V.; and, being Philistine enough to find

the lamentations of Œdipus in Act VI. a little tedious, I should not regret it. But had Shakespeare treated the subject, we may imagine the scheme like this (recalling at moments *The Winter's Tale*):—

Act I. The oracle comes to Laius, King of Thebes, warning him that if he begets a son he will die by that son's hand.

The child Œdipus is born, exposed on Cithæron (like Perdita on the coast of Bohemia), and carried off to Corinth.

Act II. Œdipus, grown to manhood, visits Delphi to inquire his parentage. The god tells him that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Fleeing from his destiny, he meets Laius on the road and kills him, not knowing who he is.

Act III. He encounters the Sphinx on her mountain above Thebes, answers her riddle, and so delivers the city from her ravages. In return he is made king and weds Jocasta.

Acts IV.–V. Cover the same ground as the whole play of Sophocles, though ending, like Ibsen, more abruptly and without the long final lamentation.

This may serve as a clear example of the difference, obvious enough in itself, between the classic and the romantic approach to a story. It will be seen that the romantic method is not without its advantages;

and one may regret that Shakespeare did not handle this superb legend instead of some of the puerile plots on which he was apt to waste his genius. Only imagine what he might have made of some of its scenes! For if the romantic form has a less perfect and close-knit unity, it gains on the other hand a far greater variety of dramatic episodes to select from. It is free, too, from that forced artificiality which may result from having to squeeze the whole action into a dozen hours; and it is certainly better to strain the spectators' imagination than the facts of life. Lastly, it leaves time for the gradual growth of character.

And yet in spite of this the modern dramatist seldom takes these Elizabethan liberties with time and place. The fascination of form has grown stronger; by spreading the action over years we feel that the tension of a piece is weakened and that the magic cauldron goes off the boil. Let too many years pass over a person's head and he is no longer quite the same person. Further, in tragedy a terrible inevitability is gained by beginning, not at the very beginning, but just before the catastrophe, when the tragic mistakes have been made and are beyond God Himself to undo; for then

> All things are taken from us and become
> Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.

The past indeed is the most tragic of the tenses. If it was happy, it is no more; if it was disastrous, it cannot be undone. And so, while the Unities of Time and Place ceased to be essential with the disappearance of the Chorus (although it was centuries before this truth was seen), modern tragedy has learnt to use moderation in transgressing them, particularly the Unity of Time.

Of all the various ways of beginning there is no space to speak at length. But it will repay the curious to study comparatively the differing habits of the dramatists—Æschylus' great opening monologues (after his two first extant plays which begin with the chorus); the quieter dialogue between two characters common in Sophocles, who had increased the actors to three and so could better afford to begin with two of them on the stage; the strangely pallid and artificial prologues of Euripides, sacrificing all illusion to a naked clarity; the prologising ghosts of Seneca, loved and copied by the Renaissance; and Shakespeare's method of quiet conversations followed almost at once by some sudden excitement.[1] Beginnings can of course be loud as well as quiet. Of the opening with a crash there is a superb example

[1] So in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.

in Webster's *White Devil*; but the quiet undoubtedly prevail. It is rash to sprint at the very start of a five mile race.

After beginning his plot, however, the next thing for the dramatist is to explain it. And here a progressive growth of technical skill has been maintained right down to our own day. The Greek audience knew the story, at least roughly, beforehand; and the Greek dramatist was helped to some extent by having a chorus which could recall antecedent events in its lyrics. The Elizabethans, on the other hand, beginning at the very beginning, had less to explain; and it is noticeable that when Shakespeare is for once really faced with the problem in *The Tempest*, where he almost adopts the Unities, how incompetently he manages it.[1] We little wonder that Miranda goes to sleep; and when Prospero turns and continues his exposition to Ariel, we have only too good an example of that familiar clumsiness by which one character is made to repeat to another what both know, merely for the benefit of the audience.

Prospero. Hast thou forgot
The fowle Witch *Sycorax*, who with Age and Envy
Was growne into a hoope? Hast thou forgot her?

[1] It is only candid to add that Coleridge gave this exposition his particular admiration.

Ariel. No, Sir.

Pro. Thou hast: where was she born? speak: tell me.

Ar. Sir, in *Argier.*

Pro. Oh, was she so? I must
Once in a moneth recount what thou hast bin,
Which thou forget'st. This damn'd Witch *Sycorax*,
For mischiefes manifold, and sorceries terrible
To enter humane hearing, from *Argier*,
Thou know'st, was banished; for one thing she did
They would not take her life: is not this true?

Ar. I, Sir.

Pro. This blew-ey'd hag was hither brought with child,
And here was left by th' Saylors . . .
Then was this Island,
Save for the Son that she did littour heere,
(A frekelld whelpe, hag-borne) not honour'd with
A humane shape.

Ar. Yes; *Caliban* her sonne.

Pro. Dull thing, I say so; he, that *Caliban*,
Whom now I keepe in service.

The reader of this may perhaps be forgiven if he is reminded by its too obvious artifice of a passage in that play of Sheridan's which so well and gaily earns its title of *The Critic* (ii. 2):

Sir Walter Raleigh. Thy fears are just.

Sir Christopher Hatton. But where? whence? when? and what
The danger is, methinks I fain would learn.

Sir Walt. You know, my friend, scarce two revolving suns,
And three revolving moons have closed their course

Since haughty Philip, in despite of peace,
With hostile hand hath struck at England's trade.
Sir Christ. I know it well.
Sir Walt. Philip, you know, is proud Iberia's king!
Sir Christ. He is.
Sir Walt. His subjects in base bigotry
And Catholic oppression held; while we,
You know, the Protestant persuasion hold.
Sir Christ. We do.
Sir Walt. You know, beside, his boasted armament,
The famed Armada, by the Pope baptized,
With purpose to invade these realms—
Sir Christ. Is sailed,
Our last advices so report. . . .

Dangle. Mr Puff, as he knows all this, why does Sir Walter go on telling him?

Puff. But the audience are not supposed to know anything of the matter, are they?

Sneer. True; but I think you manage ill: for there certainly appears no reason why Sir Walter should be so communicative.

Puff. 'Fore God, now, that's one of the most ungrateful observations I ever heard!—for the less inducement he has to tell all this, the more, I think, you ought to be obliged to him; for I'm sure you'd know nothing of the matter without it.

The French neo-classic stage contrived things fairly efficiently with the help of its serviceable, though wooden, confidants. But it is in the last fifty years, with the disappearance of the soliloquy

and the growing sensitiveness of audiences to anything improbable, that this problem has become really difficult and its handling an art in itself.

Clearly the exposition must itself be dramatic, or it will both be a bore and seem an excrescence. To be dramatic it must be charged with emotion: for a *résumé* of the bare facts can hardly be thrilling in itself. Here it is fascinating to watch the growth of Ibsen's skill from the hackneyed use of the confidant or of servants who talk about their mistresses as they lay the table, to the mastery with which in *The Master Builder* or *Ghosts* or *Rosmersholm* the exposition becomes one agonised confession. There the situation is not only revealed: the revelation in itself assures and hastens the catastrophe. These tortured souls tell their tale despite themselves, like the damned before Dante's Minos; their situation makes it impossible for them to be silent; and their speaking brings their ruin.

But there is another important question connected with this. Exactly how much is to be explained beforehand, how much to be kept secret from the audience? At first, surprise seems one of the dramatist's most obvious and brilliant weapons. Says Lope de Vega: "Keep your secret to the end. The audience will turn their faces to the door and

their backs to the stage when there is no more to learn." Similarly Boileau (*Art Poétique*, iii.):

> L'esprit ne se sent pas plus vivement frappé
> Que lorsqu'en un sujet d'intrigue enveloppé
> D'un secret tout à coup la vérité connue
> Change tout, donne à tout une face imprevue.

So ingenious critics have been found to wish that when Hamlet stabs Polonius behind the arras, Shakespeare had concealed the victim's identity and allowed his audience, like his hero, to think for a moment that it was the King himself; and to regret, again, that in the Screen-scene of *The School for Scandal* the audience was not left as ignorant as Sir Peter Teazle, who it was behind the screen. Indeed, ingenious managers have been known to do their best to improve Sheridan by at all events burning red fire in the wings at the fatal moment when the screen is overturned. Perhaps we may begin to wonder after all this whether surprise is really so valuable an engine. The Greeks managed with very little, for with them the course of the story was known. Dryden has described in his witty, exaggerated way how the Athenian audience, as soon as the name of Œdipus was uttered, knew all that was to follow—his murder of his father and his marriage with his mother and the rest of it, and "sat with a kind of

yawning expectation till he was to come with his eyes pulled out, and speak a hundred or two verses in a tragic tone in complaint of his misfortune." Yet this was not so serious a deprivation as might seem; for after all, once we have seen it, the story of the newest play is known. Surprise is for one night, not for all time. The dramatist who snatches at it is liable to pluck the blossom and lose the fruit. Even when it succeeds it may be too successful and leave the audience too astonished to give their full attention to what immediately follows. Surprise may, in general, be left to melodrama and some kinds of comedy: Tragedy has in her quiver two more keenly pointed shafts than this—Suspense and Tragic Irony.

From both we get an effect which is not exhausted in a flash, and which is not staled by age. To the nervous person in the inn it is not the boot dropped carelessly in the next room that is a source of agony, but the suspense of waiting for the second boot to drop. And it is the power to create the tense, overcharged atmosphere before the storm, to "pile the dim outlines of the coming doom," that forms no small part of the impressiveness of Æschylus or Webster, or, in a different way, of Ibsen. The *leit-motiv* of the fatal net in the *Agamemnon*, the

recurrent playing on the white horses of Rosmersholm are but methods of working on the nerves of an audience, and in more obvious ways most dramatists have used this weapon of suspense. The Ghost in *Hamlet* is long talked of before it appears; Tartuffe is kept back until Act III.; we hear the caged pacing overhead of John Gabriel Borkman long before he is disclosed to our expectant eyes. To return for a moment to Sheridan—

Sneer. But, pray, is Queen Elizabeth not to appear?

Puff. No, not once, but she is to be talked of for ever; so that, egad, you'll think a hundred times that she is on the point of coming in.

Sneer. Hang it, I think it's a pity to keep *her* in the green room all the night.

Puff. Oh no, that always has a fine effect—it keeps up expectation.

Of course, where surprise effects are greatly conceived, they may continue to be effective as suspense effects, even when they have ceased to surprise us; like the cry in *Little Eyolf*—"the crutch is floating!" or the death-blow of Othello:

I pray you in your Letters,
When you shall these unluckie deeds relate
Speake of me, as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down ought in malice.
Then must you speake

> Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well;
> Of one, not easily Iealous, but being wrought,
> Perplexed in the extreame: Of one, whose hand
> (Like the base Indian) threw a Pearle away,
> Richer than all his Tribe. . . . Set you down this;
> And say, besides, that in *Aleppo* once,
> Where a malignant, and a Turban'd Turke
> Beate a Venetian, and traduc'd the State,
> I tooke by th' throat the circumcised Dogge,
> And smoate him, thus. (*He stabs himself.*)

Tragic Irony, again, involves the full knowledge of the audience, though for the actor it may be either conscious or unconscious. That is, the speaker may be intentionally ironical; or the audience alone may see a double meaning (though sometimes only retrospectively) in what is spoken by a character with no *arrière pensée* at all. And as words may be ironic, so may actions and events. In the age of Thomas Hardy, of *Satires of Circumstances*, *Life's Little Ironies*, and *Time's Laughing-Stocks*, we hardly need instances of this. But in the close of the *Electra* of Sophocles is so elaborate an example of these four kinds of irony, conscious and unconscious, in word and in deed, that it may be quoted here. Orestes with his friend Pylades, returning in disguise to Argos with a false message of his own death, has already killed his mother Clytemnestra in revenge

for her murder of his father. Her paramour and accomplice Ægisthus now arrives from the country eager to learn from the "strangers'" own lips the glad tidings that the dreaded Orestes is dead. He enters and finds Electra standing at his palace-door (*Electra*, 1450 ff.).

Ægisthus. Where shall I find these strangers? Tell me quickly.

Electra (*pointing to the palace-door*).

There—they have touched their hostess to the heart.

Æg. Is it true that they bring news of Orestes' death?

El. They have brought Orestes' self along with them.

Æg. What, is he here to be seen with our own eyes?

El. Ay, here indeed—and a grisly sight to see.

Æg. It is long since such joyful tidings came from *thee*!

El. I wish you joy, if this brings joy indeed.

Æg. Ho, silence there! fling wide the palace-doors—

(*The doors open, revealing the disguised figures of Orestes and Pylades standing beside the shrouded body of Clytemnestra.*)

For Argos and Mycenæ to behold;
So that all such as have lived hitherto
On idle hopes of this Orestes here,
Now seeing him dead, kick at my curb no more
Nor court my righteous wrath to teach them wisdom.
Unveil the face, that one so near and dear
May have from me his due of lamentation.

Orestes. Unveil it thou. This is thy part, not mine,
To see what lies there and to call it dear.

Æg. Thou sayest well. I will. But quickly now,
Call Clytemnestra, if she is within.

Or. She is beside thee. Look nowhere else for her.

Æg. (*lifts the face-cloth from the face*). O God, what sight is this!

Or. Afraid? Is that face so strange?

Here, surely, are compensations for the short-lived pleasures of surprise. The great dramatists, then, have learned as a rule not so much to startle their audiences as to take them into their confidence. If the gods alone, as the adage says, can be spectators in the world, the spectators in the world of the theatre should be for the nonce as gods, knowing all or almost all. Against de Vega and Boileau we may set the homely common sense of Anthony Trollope: "The author and the reader should move along in full confidence with each other. Let the personages of the drama undergo for us a complete Comedy of Errors among themselves, but let the spectator never mistake the Syracusan for the Ephesian."

So far we have briefly discussed the ways of opening the tragic plot and of explaining it, and how far that exposition should leave room for surprise, or, on the contrary, cultivate suspense and irony. But on this last point more remains to be said. Of tragic irony in its familiar forms Aristotle has said nothing,

but of that form of tragedy where the whole plot is itself built on the irony of fate, where the engineer is hoisted with his own petard, and the very means which should bring safety brings only ruin, or what was meant to destroy, on the contrary, preserves—of this Aristotle has said a great deal, which has been badly garbled even by his standard commentators. And as it is perhaps the most penetrating thing Aristotle has to say of the tragic plot at all, and is essentially connected with his famous doctrine of the Tragic Error, it is worth clearing it up even at some length.

The most moving things in tragedy, Aristotle observes (ch. vi.), are "*peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*." It is usual to render these two words "reversal and recognition"; and both renderings are misleading. The only reason for translating *peripeteia* by "reversal of fortune" is that it bears this sense in later Greek and in the modern languages which have adopted the word. In this latter sense it is a *peripeteia* when Job's long prosperity is destroyed, or the victorious German armies hurled back from the Marne. But a very little study either of the drama or of Aristotle should have sufficed to show, though scholars as eminent as the late Professor Bywater were unable to see it, that this sense

of *peripeteia* makes nonsense of Aristotle. There is indeed no space here to go into the linguistic evidence;[1] but that is really hardly necessary seeing that Aristotle has himself given a perfectly lucid explanation of what he means (ch. xi.), which may be paraphrased as follows: "A *peripeteia* occurs when a course of action intended to produce a result *x*, produces the reverse of *x*. Thus the messenger comes to cheer Œdipus and free him from his fear of marrying his mother; but by revealing who Œdipus really is, he produces exactly the opposite result. Again, in the *Lynceus* the hero of that name is led off to execution, while Danaus goes with him as his intending murderer; but the upshot is that Lynceus escapes while Danaus is killed himself."

And is this, it will be asked, the most moving constituent of tragedy? We might well think that Aristotle was here deserting the obvious for the absurd; yet his dictum is not so eccentric as it seems. In the *peripeteia*, rightly understood, is implied a whole tragic philosophy of life; and in the practice of tragedy, once we see the right

[1] The true rendering was first established by Vahlen in 1866. For a detailed discussion of the question see an article by the present writer in *The Classical Review* for Aug.–Sept. 1923.

meaning of the term, we shall discover with what amazing regularity the thing itself recurs. For the deepest tragedy is not when men are struck down by the blow of chance or fate like Job or Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*; nor yet when they are destroyed by their enemies like Polyxena or Henry VI.; but when their destruction is the work of those that wish them well or of their own unwitting hands. For it is the perpetual tragic irony of the Tragedy of Life that again and again men do thus laboriously contrive their own annihilation, or kill the thing they love. When Dejanira, sending her husband the love-philtre which was to win him back, poisons him so that he dies cursing her; when Œdipus runs headlong into the jaws of the very destiny from which he is fleeing; when Barabas falls into his own boiling cauldron; when Othello at last sees himself as one who has flung away like an ignorant savage the priceless jewel of his happiness; when Macbeth is lured by the equivocations of the devil to make his own perdition sure; when Lear delivers himself into the hands of the two daughters that despise him and torments the only one that loves—all these are *peripeteias* in the true sense of Aristotle. For the most poignant tragedy of human life is the work of human blindness—the Tragedy of Errors.

> In tragic life, God wot,
> No villain need be. Passions spin the plot,
> We are betrayed by what is false within.

In vain men pray, like Ajax on the plains of Troy, at least to perish in the light and seeing the faces of their foes; they fall blindly in the fatal confusion of a world "where ignorant armies clash by night." This, indeed, is in a sense the oldest as well as the deepest tragedy on earth—the tragedy of our First Parents, who plucked the apple in the hope that they should live as gods and "knew not eating death." The beasts perish by enemies or by disease; it is the privilege of man alone, in his foolish blinded cunning, to dig his own grave. This is the irony of Juvenal—

> *Votaque numinibus magna exaudita malignis.*
> Petitions granted by malignant gods,
> And prayers on which a bitter heaven smiles.

And in yet another form it is the crowning paradox of Christ: "Whosoever will save his life, shall lose it."

Now, once it is seen that by his *peripeteia* Aristotle means this tragic effect of human effort producing exactly the opposite result to its intention, this irony of human blindness, we see at last why he connects the *peripeteia* so closely with the *anagnorisis* or "dis-

covery."[1] The *peripeteia*, in short, is the working in blindness to one's own defeat: the *anagnorisis* is the realisation of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the sudden lightning-flash in the darkness.

> Then there came
> On that blind sin swift eyesight like a flame.

This flash of revelation may appear, as Aristotle points out, either before it is too late, or after; before, as in the *Cresphontes* of Euripides, where the mother with uplifted weapon realises just in time that the supposed murderer of her son, asleep before her, is that son himself; or as the summer lightning revealed to David Balfour at the vital moment that abyss before his feet on the ruined staircase of the House of Shaws. In such cases there is, of course, a happy ending. Or the flash may come after the catastrophe, serving only to reveal it and complete it, as when Œdipus discovers his guilt, or Rustum or Cuchulain recognises the dying son he has himself slain.

[1] "Recognition" is a mistranslation. We associate the word too closely with the narrow sense of discovering a person's identity; whereas *anagnorisis* may equally well signify the discovery of things unknown before, and applies alike to the recognition of Imogen by Posthumus and the realisation by Othello of the true facts of the situation. "Realisation" indeed would be a possible translation of the word.

Turn to modern tragedy: the *peripeteia* and "discovery" still keep their central place. In Ibsen's *Doll's House* Nora, trying to save her husband, thereby loses him; and the ensuing cry of recognition rings clear in her own words: "It burst upon me that I had been living here these eight years with a strange man." In consequence, she herself abandons the husband she has been struggling so frantically to keep. The *peripeteia* is complete.

Thus, though Aristotle says nothing of tragic irony as such, he makes this particular irony of circumstances the crucial thing in tragedy in general and the very basis of its classification. For he divides tragedies into two classes—those that have *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis* and those that have not—Tragedies of Error, we might say, as against the far rarer and on the whole less significant Tragedies of Simple Circumstance, like *The Trojan Women* of Euripides. We may, indeed, definitely summarise the two kinds of tragedy in the words of two different passages of *Lear*:

> As Flies to wanton Boyes, are we to th' Gods—
> They kill us for their sport.

That is Aristotle's simple tragedy of circumstance. But again:

> The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us.

There we have the tragedy of recoil, with its *peripeteia*; and we may be reminded of Hegel's statement of the same principle: "The character which is dramatic plucks for himself the fruit of his own deeds."

Yet it must be recognised also that the vice by which men are "plagued" may sometimes be simply that natural human weakness which is unable to foresee the future. And here we come to the other famous Aristotelian doctrine of the ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*) or Tragic Error. This too has been curiously misunderstood, and in consequence the connection between the Tragedy of Errors with its *peripeteia* (ch. xi.) and this Tragic Error (ch. xiii.—ch. xii. is probably an interpolation) was completely obscured, while the meaning of *peripeteia* was itself misrepresented. Whereas it now becomes obvious at once why Aristotle passes from considering the Tragedy of Errors to discussing the Tragic Error. For the word he uses means simply "a mistake," though there have always been persistent attempts on the part of moralising critics to make the *hamartia* much more definitely a moral weakness, a sin, than it really is. For poetic justice has always been dear to the mediocre mind, and sometimes to minds not

mediocre. It is so satisfactory to the complacency of prosperous persons to insist that those less fortunate are so only by their own fault and that those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell somehow deserved it. And it has been all the easier to make this mistake, because Aristotle himself is slightly confused between what is ethically good and what is æsthetically good, or magnificent. That confusion was naturally easier for the Greek, who used the same adjective to describe a "good" thing and a "beautiful" one, and had no belief in the goodness of such unmagnificent qualities as meekness and humility. We shall find the same muddle between ethic and æsthetic goodness, between virtue and splendour of character, appearing again later in Aristotle's demand that the characters of tragedy must be good (χρηστά). For a race so abundantly intellectual as to produce the Socratic dogma "Virtue *is* Knowledge," it was easy to obscure the difference between error and sin. Greek philosophy indeed was curiously prone to forget the weakness of the human will. But the important thing here is to grasp that Aristotle's ideal form of tragedy is simply this—one in which the destruction of hero or heroine is caused by some false step taken in blindness.[1]

[1] The *peripeteia* may, it is worth noting, be caused by the mistaken intentions of some *minor* character, like the messenger in

This false step may either be a crime like Clytemnestra's or a mere miscalculation like Dejanira's. And it is mere distortion to read into this theory the moralist's idea of the tragic disaster as necessarily the punishment of sin. Here once more the problem of tragedy becomes one with the whole problem of evil. "Poetic justice"—how hard the craving for it has died! Yet to-day it seems merely grotesque to read the sort of explanations in which Gervinus delighted—how Duncan deserved his fate for being so incautious where he went to stay, Desdemona for her carelessness with her pocket-handkerchiefs. We are left cold by the outcry of Lessing at "the mere thought, in itself so terrible, that there should be human beings who can be wretched without any fault of their own." Did this man, we wonder, living among the horrors of the Seven Years' War, fondly console himself with the thought that all its agonies were deserved? And what a consolation! "Alas, my husband," cried Phocion's wife, as he was about to drink the hemlock, "you die innocent."

the *Œdipus*. But the *Œdipus* is rather an exceptional case, and Aristotle in his brief discussion does not exhaust the possibilities. His ideal hero had in any case to show some human frailty and not be a Sir Charles Grandison (see ch. xv.); and so naturally he preferred the neatness and economy of making this frailty cause the catastrophe.

"Would you have me die guilty?" was the reply. Yet even Aristotle himself, as we shall see when we come to deal with Character, felt that the misfortunes of absolutely righteous characters were too shocking for the tragic stage. Poetic justice is not only a fiction; it is not even poetic. And yet this yearning of the human mind to believe the Universe not utterly amoral has moulded the whole history of tragedy. For though it is clear that the Tragic Error need not be moral, it is equally clear that it very often has been. Thus we watch Æschylus in play after play struggling with this question of life's justice. If the fathers ate sour grapes, are the children's teeth set on edge? Surely we cannot deny it, when we look on the sinister destinies of generation after generation of Tantalid and Labdacid. And yet, if so, where is justice? Æschylus answers with a compromise. Yes, the children's teeth are set on edge; but they do not perish unless they have plucked poison of their own. Guilt haunts some families like an evil spirit lurking at the door; but the evil spirit is powerless until the individual takes the first false step. It is like a hereditary predisposition to some disease. The Tragic Error in Æschylus is, then, that first false step: it is definitely sin, as in the most Hebraic of the Hellenes we should

expect it to be. But in Sophocles how different! Concerned not to justify life's ways but to show them, he finds no difficulty in representing the downfall of a man doomed before his birth, in the very moment he was begotten. Œdipus has the faults, the hot temper, the imperiousness, that serve to make us dread his fall; but they do not cause it. Dejanira's ruin comes only from her too great trustfulness; Antigone's from her unflinching sense of duty. Still less in Euripides is there any justifying of the ways of God; often they are openly denounced and the Tragic Error is sometimes not moral, sometimes absent altogether. Iphigenia and Polyxena are helpless and innocent victims. Hippolytus has sinned only in being righteous overmuch. In short, Euripides was not afraid to break, before it was made, Aristotle's prohibition of the sufferings of innocence. Turn to Shakespeare. Hamlet's Tragic Error is his failure to act; and this is doubtless a moral flaw, such as it is usual to suppose that the *hamartia* must always be. But we must not imagine that, as with Æschylus, this is connected with any sense of a general justice in the world, or that Hamlet's fault merited the frightful punishment it entailed. Hamlet fails to act and disaster follows: but if we are inclined to suppose that this was a just retribution,

we need only turn to the play immediately preceding, where Hamlet's not less noble counterpart does act, only to die despairing on Philippi field. The folly of Lear, the credulity of Othello, the pride of Coriolanus, the love of Antony, or the miscalculation of Romeo—more and more as we examine such examples it becomes clear that their tragic errors serve to make their fate not just, but logical and convincing. In vain Racine with conscious effort tries to make the punishment fit the crime, at least in his prefaces: who thinks of his Phèdre as a criminal? And if we seek the *hamartia* in more modern tragedy like Ibsen's, it becomes clearer than ever that an intellectual mistake is all that the term need mean. In that clear, bleak, Scandinavian world the root of evil has become more than ever an intellectual thing. Not "be good, sweet maid, and let who will, be clever"—it is the failure to think out situations fundamentally, the weakness of relying on formulæ however noble, that brings to the precipice Brand and Mrs Alving, Nora and Rosmer and the Dead who awake too late. But in general there is one passion above the rest which produces so exactly the blind and pardonable error Aristotle demands, that it is strange to find how little part it plays in that Greek drama on which Aristotle

drew. There are only one or two supreme exceptions like the *Hippolytus* and the *Medea*. The moderns, however, have made up with a vengeance for that ancient neglect, and nine out of ten of our plays have no other spring than Love, so that its blind god seems to have replaced Dionysus himself as the deity both of our tragic and comic stages, and of their rival the novel as well. In vain we weary of his eternal rule; in vain we cry out for other motives than "the long littleness of love"; for here is the one fundamental thing which happens to almost all of us and kindles life for a moment even in the dullest of the living dead. As the frog to the student of medicine, so the lover to the anatomist of the human heart; no other creature is at once so universally abundant and so illuminating to handle. All other passions have beside this a narrower interest and a shallower appeal. It is well that literature should turn to harp on other heart-strings when it can; but it is well also to recognise that for our world love remains the great source of real tragedy. In a peaceful civilisation it must be so; in wilder ages when life itself is in perpetual danger, men feel more strongly about other things. "Love does not vex the man that begs his bread," says a shrewd fragment of Euripides; and Napoleon, con-

demning in Racine, as contrasted with Corneille, "une perpetuelle fadeur, un éternel amour," echoes the same truth: "L'amour alors, et plus tard encore, était toute l'affaire de la vie de chacun. C'est toujours le lot des sociétés oisives." But we cannot choose our ages; we might not prefer retreats from Moscow, if we could; in any case women have largely made the civilised society of modern Europe, and it has made love to them in return. Some may feel in the dry words of Bacon that "the stage is more beholding to Love than the life of man. For as to the stage, love is ever matter of comedies, and now and then of tragedies. But in life it doth much mischief; sometimes like a syren, sometimes like a fury." But in tragic literature at all events we must recognise the prophetic truth of the cry of Sophocles to "Eros the unconquerable." His triumph has indeed fashioned some of the deepest tragedies.

> The asp of Egypt, the Numidian wine,[1]
> My Sigurd's sword, my Brynhild's fiery bed;
> The toll of years of Gudrun's drearihead,
> And Tristram's glaive, and Iseult's shriek are here;
> And cloister-gown of joyless Guinivere.

The essence, then, of Aristotle's theory of the tragic plot is this. At its best, tragedy is the story

[1] (Of Sophonisba.)

of human blindness leading human effort to checkmate itself—a Tragedy of Error. The *hamartia* is the Tragic Error; the *peripeteia* is its fatal working to a result the opposite of that intended; the *anagnorisis*, the realisation of the truth. The error may or may not be moral. And the insistence on it is not based on any conception of life's justice but on the purely artistic and logical consideration that it is neater, formally, that calamities should begin at home. After all, the question is not whether the *hamartia* is ever wilful sin, but whether sin is ever wilful. The Universe may proceed by law; but it knows no justice. For its laws are those of cause and effect, not of right and wrong. Similarly, in the life that tragedy pictures, there may or may not be justice: but there must be law, not figs growing on thistles, if we are to feel that inevitability which a play needs in order to convince. And the peculiar virtue of the Tragedy of Error is that it is convincing in its logic, neat in its form, and poignant in its irony. It remains not the only kind of tragedy, but, as Aristotle says, the best.

V

CHARACTER

Of the characters of tragedy Aristotle stipulates that they must be "good" (but not perfect), "true to type," and "consistent" or true to themselves.[1] The first of these strikes us at once as an extraordinary demand. Attempts have been made by subsequent critics to rationalise it. "Good," for Corneille (who was always concerned to make the *Poetics* square as far as possible in retrospect with his own past practice), meant "magnificent." Thus his Cléopâtre was wicked, he observed, but she had greatness of soul. For Dacier and Metastasio, on the other hand, "good" meant "well marked." But wriggle as the critics may, it is clear, if only

[1] The tragic character must also be, he says, ὅμοιος—the sense of which is uncertain: probably it means "true to tradition" (the characters of Greek tragedy being always familiar legendary figures). That is to say, in Greek tragedy Medea must not be made too soft-hearted, just as in a Bible play Jeremiah could not be represented as a buoyant optimist, or Herod with a passion for children.

from the context, that "good" (χρηστά) here means "virtuous." "Even a woman," continues the philosopher, "*may* be good; or a slave." And if it seems preposterous that Aristotle should not have risen above such ultra-masculine prejudice, it is only necessary to turn to his *History of Animals* (ix. i. 608B): "Accordingly woman is more sympathetic and easily moved to tears than man, but also more envious and querulous, readier with abuse and blows; and, again, the female sex is more despondent and apprehensive, more shameless and more mendacious." And as for the scarcity of virtue in the slave we may remember the words of Homer: "God takes half the worth from a man on the day when slavery comes upon him." For the Greek view is here the exact reverse of Christianity with its praise of the poor and down-trodden; of Christian theory at least.

The real point is, however, that Aristotle is clearly insisting that the *dramatis personæ* of tragedy shall be as fine in character as the plot permits. So in Greek sculpture, though a Silenus or a Centaur could not be made to look like an Apollo, they are given so far as possible an idealised beauty of their own. And tragedy in Aristotle's theory represented men as finer than they are, as Polygnotus painted

them finer or as Raphael ennobled the mean presence of St Paul.

To-day we no longer believe in Aristotle's dictum: already Euripides had transgressed it in his pursuit of realism. The poet who was not afraid to bring on the stage characters in rags, was not afraid to bring upon it also ragged souls—mean figures like Jason and that Menelaus in the *Orestes* of whom Aristotle complains as being unnecessarily vile. But though we cannot accept this insistence that characters must be as good as possible, in fairness to Aristotle we must remember that with "good" in the Greek sense of the word the principle is not so absurd as it seems to us who have Christian ethics in the background of our minds. To demand that *dramatis personæ* should as far as possible obey the Sermon on the Mount would be far more ridiculous. For the meek do not inherit the world of the theatre. Theirs is the least dramatic of human qualities; and it is seldom that a tragic hero turns the other cheek. But in the different pagan sense of virtue, as strength and intensity of character rather than purity of soul, Aristotle's words are not without their force. Machiavelli who found *virtù* even in Cæsar Borgia, has himself vividly expressed the opposition of the two ideals—"Christianity places the supreme good

in humility, meekness, and the contempt of worldly things, while Paganism sees it in greatness of soul, strength of body, and all the qualities that make a man formidable." Accordingly Christianity trains men "to endure evils, not to perform great actions." Indeed it is curious to notice how, under the influence of Machiavelli and Seneca, the characters of many Elizabethan plays are so far from being "good," that the hero and the villain become one and the same; in fact, Marlowe and Marston, Webster and Chapman, provide strange anticipations of the super-man "beyond good and evil."

> Give me a spirit that on life's rough sea
> Loves to have his sails fill'd with a lusty wind,
> Even till his sail-yards tremble, his masts crack,
> And his rapt ship runs on her side so low
> That she drinks water and her keel ploughs air.
> There is no danger to a man that knows
> What Life and Death is: there's not any law
> Exceeds his knowledge: neither is it lawful
> That he should stoop to any other law.

But it was a transient phase. Such dragons of the period are all but extinct upon the modern stage, except in melodrama. We have learnt with Meredith

> In tragic life, God wot,
> No villain need be.

It is less often wickedness than weakness that breaks the hearts of modern tragedy. And if Aristotle's rule, that characters must be as good as possible in the circumstances of the plot, still seems to us rather a naïve and narrow one, as we remember Euripides and Shakespeare and Ibsen, yet among the depressing creatures who populate much modern fiction, with its preference for mediocre minds and the fall of sparrows rather than of eagles, its fear that anything heroic may seem mock-heroic, we may feel that Aristotle was in this matter not altogether on the wrong track. But we realise, too, that there is no rule about the character of tragic characters except that they must have character; and we can only add that not wickedness, but weakness, remains the hardest of all human qualities to make dramatic.

But though Aristotle demanded that the characters of tragedy shall be good, he has also demanded elsewhere, as we have seen in discussing plot, that the character of the tragic hero shall not be too good. Here we may accept his rule, though not his reason for it. The objection to perfect characters is not that their misfortunes are, as Aristotle says, unbearable, but that they are apt themselves to be so. Angels make poor *dramatis personæ*; it is human

beings that we need.[1] In the words of the queen of the blameless Arthur—

> He is all fault who has no fault at all,
> For who loves me, must have some touch of earth;
> The low sun makes the colour.

On the other hand the world of to-day has not much use for Aristotle's demand that characters must be "true to type"; indeed a modern dramatist would be very moderately flattered by being told that his characters were absolutely typical. In the earlier stages of literature men found it a fascinating amusement to classify humanity into its various species; but the classification, once made, quickly becomes trite and proves superficial; and so the creative artist of the next age studies to avoid the typical as eagerly as his predecessors had sought it. He finds variety by closer observation of the real world in its minuter features—after Æschylus, Euripides; after Corneille, Racine. We can still

[1] That the real reason was artistic, not moral, was already clear to Boileau (*Art Poétique*, iii.):

> Des héros de roman fuyez les petitesses :
> Toutefois aux grands cœurs donnez quelques foiblesses.
> Achille déplairoit, moins bouillant et moins prompt :
> J'aime à lui voir verser des pleurs pour un affront.
> A ces petits défauts marqués dans sa peinture,
> L'esprit avec plaisir reconnoît la nature.

enjoy the *Characters* of Theophrastus or of Earle; but in so far as such types can find a place on the stage at all, it is less in Tragedy than in the Comedy of Manners. There is no Tragedy of Manners: and we can scarcely believe our eyes as we read Rymer's complaint that Iago is a badly drawn character because soldiers are notoriously an honest class of men. Coleridge indeed echoes Aristotle: "I adopt with full faith the principle of Aristotle, that poetry is essentially ideal, that it avoids and excludes all accident; that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be representative of a class; and that the persons of poetry must be clothed with generic attributes, with the common attributes of their class."[1] But most of us will find more to sympathise with in the curt summary of Blake's *Notes on Reynolds*: "To generalise is to be an idiot. To particularise is the great distinction of merit." And similarly Mr Yeats in *Plays and Controversies*:[2] "All art is founded upon personal vision, and the greater the art, the more personal the vision; and all bad art is founded upon impersonal types and images, accepted by average men and women out of imaginative poverty and timidity, or the exhaustion that comes

[1] *Biographia Literaria*, xvii. [2] Pp. 143, 154.

from labour. . . . Our opportunity in Ireland is not that our playwrights have more talent—it is possible that they have less than the workers in an old tradition—but that the necessity of putting a life that has not hitherto been dramatised into these plays, excludes all these types which have had their origin in a different social order." We can only demand that characters shall not be so eccentric as to prevent us believing in them or feeling with them. Thus it was at first the stock thing to say that Hedda Gabler was "impossible"; until Grant Allen retorted that he took her down to dinner twice a week. But if we want characters typical enough to seem intelligible, we want them also untypical enough to seem individual. Aristotle's objection was to figures like the philosophic Princess Melanippe in Euripides, for it is uncommon for princesses to talk Natural Science. Very likely he would have felt the same of Portia. But we need not dwell on a precept that is partly obvious, partly obsolete; nor yet on Aristotle's other demand for consistency in character, with its saving clause that a person may be consistently inconsistent, as for instance—

> Varium et mutabile semper
> Femina.

That Virgilian phrase with its ungallant in-

sinuation of female fickleness may recall us to dwell for a moment on Aristotle's calm dictum, already quoted, that "even a woman may be good" —so like Pope's sneer "most women have no character at all." Now it is a curious satire on this supercilious verdict that, though women have never indeed written great tragedy, they have in fact repeatedly dominated it. "In Shakespeare," observes Mr Shaw, "it is always the woman who takes the initiative." And the extraordinary thing is not only that Mr Shaw's observation turns out to be true, but that it is even wider than Shakespeare in its truth and applies with very few exceptions to tragedy in general from Æschylus to Ibsen. It remains a strange and almost inexplicable fact that in Athena's city, where women were kept in almost Oriental suppression as odalisques or drudges, the stage should yet have produced figures like Clytemnestra and Cassandra, Atossa and Antigone, Phædra and Medea, and all the other heroines who dominate play after play of the "misogynist" Euripides. The influence and inspiration of Homer, whose whole world is nearer to the North with its Brynhilds and its Valkyries, may count for something. And, of course, there were *hetairai* like Aspasia. But the paradox of this world where in real life a respectable

woman could hardly show her face alone in the street, and yet on the stage woman equals or surpasses man, has never been satisfactorily explained. In modern tragedy as a whole the same predominance exists. Had it existed here alone we might have explained it on the theory that as plays have been written by men mainly for men, the romantic instinct did the rest. Only in Greece, of course, woman was not an object of romance. At all events a very cursory survey of Shakespeare's work (similarly with Webster, though not with Marlowe or Jonson) suffices to reveal how this dominance, this initiative of women persists from Rosalind to Lady Macbeth. So too in Racine; six of his tragedies bear their heroines' names; and what male characters of his shall we set against Hermione and Andromaque, Bérénice and Roxane, Phèdre and Athalie? So again with Ibsen; what men shall we match with Solveig and Nora, Hedda and Hilda Wangel and Rebecca West? Even that ruthless realist leaves his women with a touch of the heroic and the ideal. It is an odd, not perhaps a very important fact, but a sufficient answer, I think, to the dictum of Aristotle —"even a woman *may* be good."

Of his last main principle, that characters of either sex should be distinguished persons of high estate,

we so little feel the force to-day that it is hard to realise how long it remained valid. Originally tragedy was written about the great of the earth simply because in its religious beginning demi-gods and heroes were its heroes. And if this custom had arisen by accident, yet there was reason also for its continuance; for Greek tragedy was idealistic, its figures larger than life. Besides, the higher the estate, the greater the fall that follows. As William Painter has written in that prose version of the story of the Duchess of Malfi which Webster used: "So lykewys the fall of a heigh and lofty Tree maketh greater noyse than that which is low and little. Hygh Towers and stately Palaces of Prynces bee seene farther off than the poore Cabans and homely shepheardes sheepecotes: the Walles of lofty Cittyes more a loofe doe Salute the Viewers of the same, than the simple Caves, which the Poore doe digge belowe the Mountayne Rockes." It is first in Euripides that this convention begins to be undermined; here the slave is ennobled, like the woman and the barbarian, while the heroes of legend and the kings of ancient Hellas are brought down to the meaner scale of real life. But the rule died hard. Elizabethan drama might introduce its clowns and its citizens, but its kings and lords remained;

and its tragedies of domestic life like *Arden of Feversham*, the obscure ancestors of our modern serious drama, form but a small minority. The French stage as usual was more rigid even than the Greek: where Euripides introduces a simple herdsman in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, his French imitators would content themselves with nothing meaner than a prince of the blood royal of the Crimea; and the charming young Ion who sweeps the temple steps of Delphi with his broom would have provoked smiles of pity at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The meanest confidant allowed in their theatre must be a person of the most respectable connections. To-day all is changed. The aristocracy holds the stage only of melodrama; and the modern spectator goes above all to see people like himself, characters who are not screened by any divinity of rank from that close scrutiny of the tiniest motives and emotions for which we have come above all to care. Men as they are, not nobler than they are—truth, not splendour—the reactions of the human heart to love and personal relations rather than to crownings and dethronements—these are the subjects of our age. Perhaps we have lost something in what D'Annunzio calls "this grey flood of democratic mud," this world of the middle classes, this

stage whose god is sex. But the change was so inevitable that we can hardly imagine any alternative with vividness enough to make us wish things otherwise.

Finally, a word may be said on the somewhat academic issue raised by Aristotle's view that plot is more important than character. "Plot," he says, "is the fundamental thing, the soul of tragedy; whereas character is secondary." This judgment he justifies by an argument not quite worthy of a philosopher. A play, he urges, can be produced without any character-drawing to speak of, but it cannot be produced without a plot; therefore plot is the main thing (μέγιστον). But this confuses the issue. Because a minimum of A may be more indispensable than a minimum of B it does not follow that a maximum of A is more valuable than a maximum of B. We cannot live without a backbone, but we can live without any higher intellectual life; yet we do not say on that account that a first-rate set of vertebræ is more important than a first-rate brain. Nor is there any real force in Aristotle's other argument that novices gain skill in character-drawing sooner than in the construction of a good plot: what does that signify? The truth is surely that the relative importance of character and plot

varies with different dramatists and different national temperaments. To the Greek mind or the French, with their sense of how much more a beautiful whole is than the sum of its parts, Aristotle's view may seem true and the *Œdipus* or *Athalie* decisive examples of its truth. Whereas the Englishman, remembering how Shakespeare with his uncertain handling—sometimes masterly, sometimes childish—of stories, in themselves often quite third-rate, has yet created Falstaff and Hamlet, tends to subscribe rather to the opposite dictum of Vanbrugh: "I believe I could show that the chief entertainment as well as the moral lies much more in the Character and the Diction than in the Business and the Event." Certainly we must admit that in the evolution of Tragedy there has been far more room for the growth of character-drawing than the plot. After Sophocles we may have, as in Euripides or in the nineteenth century, more complicated, more ingenious, more surprising plots, but not more perfect ones; whereas that knowledge of the human heart which is half a science, has progressed like a science and, so to speak, accumulated subtlety. The human mind cannot hover for ever, with Æschylus, like an eagle above the mountain peaks. It must change; it cannot soar higher; so it descends nearer to the

earth and begins to discover the flowers upon the precipices and the whole world of smaller things. What seemed trivial becomes significant, the look in a woman's eyes more interesting than the rise of dynasties, the dropping of a handkerchief than the falling of the topless towers of Ilium. With Euripides the Chorus, the representative of the old universality, is already decaying; and we hear instead for the first time the debate of the two contending spirits within a single divided soul. The mighty wind and the earthquake give place to the still, small, dissonant voices heard by him who listens to his own heart. Since then that process has gone on and on. It is true that the most appropriate field for such psychology is not the stage but the novel, where there is more time and space for such analyses and they can be explained by the author himself. Still this complexity of character, if not the most important thing in modern tragedy, is the most important sphere of its advance. There the question must rest; it is rather an idle one; and it is confused by the ambiguous overlapping of the two things compared. As Dryden has said: "Every alteration or crossing of a design, every new-sprung passion or turn of it, is a part of the action, and much the noblest, except we conceive nothing to be action

till they come to blows." Character and plot do indeed grow harder and harder to separate, as the plot takes place more and more inside the character and the crises of the drama in the theatre of the soul. Hamlet is the first modern man.

> Action is transitory—a step, a blow,
> The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
> 'Tis done, and in the after vacancy
> We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:
> Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark,
> And shares the nature of infinity.

VI

DICTION AND SPECTACLE

With three of Aristotle's six elements of Tragedy we have dealt—its lyricism, its plot, its character. There remain its intellectual element, its diction, and the spectacular. Of the intellectual side of Tragedy, the ideas that the speakers express in language, not much need be said: it is one of the parts of drama which, like its character-drawing, has tended to increase just as its more lyrical and poetical side has dwindled away. So that in the Discussion Play a species of drama has even been invented in which this element becomes supreme. We can watch the same progress over and over again, from the mysticism of Æschylus to the logic-chopping of Euripides; from the ruthless will of Corneille to the sceptical propaganda of Voltaire; from the thunders of Marlowe to the wit—last breath of a dying drama—of Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Sheridan. The intellect illumines the poet's world like a tropical sun, first quickening, then

scorching it to dust and disillusion. "C'est une grande force de ne pas comprendre." But often as history repeats itself, it does not always do so. And since Ibsen, so intellectual though so much more than merely intellectual, we may perhaps hope that the serious drama has become acclimatised to the harsh light of the critical intelligence and may survive as an oasis in that desert.

As for Diction and Spectacle, the key to the development of these is the perpetual instinct of drama to struggle to come closer and closer to real life. And, we may add, the closer it has come to life the nearer it has generally been to dying. Tragedy begins as an oratorio: it becomes a conversation overheard in a room, an accident seen in the street. And in its diction and spectacle this effort to become more realistic is the one ruling tendency.

The terms which a poet uses, said Aristotle (ch. xxi.), may be divided into six kinds. First, those current in ordinary speech—that calling a spade a spade on which Wordsworth insisted, at least in theory; secondly, foreign terms imported from other languages or from dialect, like "fey" or "ennui"; thirdly, those which are metaphorical like "cold-blooded"; fourthly, the ornamental periphrasis beloved of eighteenth-century poetry, but

now left mainly to the journalist—"the Son of Thetis," "the tame villatic fowl"; fifthly, new coinages like "jabberwock" or "the fairy *mimbling-mambling* in the garden"; sixthly, forms not entirely invented, but modified by lengthening like "faery," by shortening like "sovran," or simply by varying the form, as "corse" for "corpse."

Now the poet's style, Aristotle proceeds, must fulfil two conditions above all—"it must be clear and it must not be mean." If it uses only "current" words, it will be clear but mean, as Wordsworth very often is: if it uses only strange words, it will not be mean, but either obscure or jargon, like Sir Thomas Browne occasionally and Francis Thompson too often. Accordingly, "modified" words are useful as being neither mean nor obscure; to-day, however, they are liable to seem to us affected and conventional. After curtly disposing of a certain Ariphrades, who had anticipated Wordsworth's objection to poetic diction, Aristotle then gives his own conclusion. Compounded words are best for the Dithyramb (a full-dress lyric or ode, which can be richer, because shorter, than epic; for instance, "The Hound of Heaven," or an ode of Keats); rare words suit epic, as we see in Spenser and Milton; whereas metaphorical diction is best suited

to the iambic verse of drama. For this is the metre closest to the prose of ordinary life, as befits an imitation of that life; and a poetic diction which is mainly metaphorical can keep closest to the vocabulary of ordinary life also. "The gift for metaphor," adds Aristotle, "is the greatest of all. This alone cannot be taught, but is a mark of natural genius; for it implies an inborn eye for likenesses."

To the far-reaching truth of this last statement, disguised as usual in the simple-seeming language of Aristotle, criticism has hardly done justice. It is seldom realised how much of the art of poetry consists in the somewhat childish pleasure of glimpsing and implying simply that one thing is like another, in revealing unseen similarities between the unlikeliest things in the vast, tumbled treasure-chest of the Universe. It is worth taking a speech which bears Shakespeare's stamp on every line and simply noting how much of his most characteristic effect is due simply to his wealth of metaphor:

Time hath (my Lord) a wallet at his backe,
Wherein he puts almes for oblivion;
A great-siz'd monster of ingratitudes;
Those scraps are good deedes past,
Which are devour'd as fast as they are made,
Forgot as soone as done; perseverance, deere my Lord,
Keepes honour bright, to have done, is to hang

Quite out of fashion, like a rustie maile,
In monumentall mockrie : take the instant way,
For honour travels in a straight so narrow,
Where one but goes abreast—keepe then the path:
For emulation hath a thousand Sonnes,
That one by one pursue; if you give way
Or hedge aside from the direct forthright,
Like to an entred Tyde, they all rush by,
And leave you hindmost:
Or like a gallant Horse falne in first ranke,
Lye there for pavement to the abject rear,
Ore-run and trampled on: then what they doe in present
Though lesse then yours in past, must ore-top yours:
For time is like a fashionable Hoste,
That slightly shakes his parting Guest by th' hand;
And with his armes out-stretcht, as he would flye,
Graspes in the commer; the welcome ever smiles,
And farewell goes out sighing: O, let not virtue seeke
Remuneration for the thing it was: for beautie, wit,
High birth, vigor of bone, desert in service,
Love, friendship, charity are subjects all
To envious and calumniating time:
One touch of nature makes the whole world kin:
That all with one consent praise new-borne gaudes,
Though they are made and moulded of things past,
And give to dust, that is a little guilt,
More laud then guilt ore-dusted.

Such is that diction of Shakespeare which Dryden described as "pestered with figurative expressions." This gift of metaphor is indeed one of the hardest

things to preserve when literatures become literary; and writers like Burns and Synge have succeeded in breathing fresh life into the jaded style of convention simply by going back to the plain vigour of the poor and uneducated, whose minds and vocabulary, instead of dealing in ghostly abstractions, cling still to the concrete. We may remember the preface to *The Play-boy of the Western World*: "Anyone who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings in this play are tame indeed compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay. All art is a collaboration. . . . It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work he used many phrases that he had just heard, as he sat at dinner, from his mother or his children. . . . When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen* some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. . . . In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry." This hardly needs

illustration. A poet like Byron will say, "The tree of knowledge is not that of life"; the Arab tribesman will say, "The tree of silence bears the fruit of peace"; in the sophisticated society of Dr Johnson this will turn into the colourless, "Taciturnity is conducive to tranquillity." "Be not thine own worm"—how different is that in force and vividness from "Don't be morbid"! "Thou hast built thy monstrous tower of crime on a foundation of painted smoke," says the Caliph in Flecker's *Hassan*; on Western lips and in a world of newspapers we can hear that becoming, "This supreme crime was devoid of any foundation not completely nebulous"; and as the tongue patters these *clichés*, not the ghost of an image rises in the mind. The modern writer is like that Orion whose wraith Odysseus saw in Hades, chasing the spectres of the beasts that once in life he slew upon the lonely hills. We say that we are "well off," and not one of us remembers that this is in origin the nautical metaphor of some sailor who had seen the breakers white and threatening on a lee-shore. To-day the phrase is but an empty shell that has ceased even to murmur of the sea. "Let us burn our boats," cries the popular orator, "and launch out into the open sea." And how are we to breathe any of the beauty of poetry

into the dramatic speech that represents a society where men do not even speak, like Monsieur Jourdain, prose?

This denudation of language, this rubbing-down of pointed word and phrase, can be watched in an accelerated form in the diction of the drama from Æschylus to Euripides and Menander, from Marlowe to Shirley and Congreve. It is only in the spendthrift splendour of its youth that Tragedy dares speak gigantically in the "helmeted phrases" of an Æschylus; its prime is as vivid, but less untamed; then come culture and *cliché* and critic.

Gute Gesellschaft hab' ich gesehn. Man nennt sie die Gute
Wenn sie zum kleinsten Gedicht keine Gelegenheit giebt.

Epic and lyric can take refuge then in the language of other ages, or of none; but the drama dies if it retreats too far from its audience. Where Æschylus had written "mud, the brother of dust"—"war, the money-changer of bodies"—"my hope treads not within the halls of fear"—"the jaw of Salmydessus, step-mother of ships," Euripides made his characters talk often with the bare clearness and matter-of-factness of the law-courts of Athens. From

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?

or

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

we pass to the muted music of the later Jacobeans on the eve of its final silence, to Ford's

> For he is like to something I remember,
> A great while since, a long, long time ago;

or Shirley's

> Let me look upon my sister now;
> Still she retains her beauty.
> Death has been kind to leave her all this sweetness.
> Thus in a morning have I oft saluted
> My sister in her chamber; sat upon
> Her bed and talked of many a harmless passage.
> But now 'tis night and a long night with her:
> I shall ne'er see these curtains drawn again
> Until we meet in heaven.

So with Racine, the supreme example of the poet of a sophisticated society, who produces his effects with a poverty-stricken vocabulary and some half-dozen threadbare images that come marching round and round like a stage-army.

We have said that the theatre shows in an accelerated form the general wearing-down of language into something more and more abstract, plain, and prosaic. That is because the ordinary wear and tear is reinforced by another tendency, which makes the career of poetic tragedy a galloping consumption—that tendency toward realism which

turns from gazing at the heavens to a microscope focussed on the tiniest fibres of the human heart. Hence an inevitable change from gong and cymbal to the bald, broken speech of daily life. As in diction, so in metre; from the rhythmic pomp of Æschylus we pass to the tripping iambics of Euripides; from Marlowe's thunderous

> Usumcasane and Theridamas,
> Is it not passing brave to be a king
> And ride in triumph through Persepolis?

to the shamble of Shirley's

> He had better cool his hot blood in the frozen
> Sea, and rise hence a rock of adamant
> To draw more wonder to the north, than but
> Attempt to wrong her chastity.

And now—is verse-drama dead? Was it already past cure when Dryden and his fellows tried to galvanise it with the heroic couplet? Was *Venice Preserved* its dying breath? In French literature *Hernani* seems to-day a gigantic *pastiche*; and *Faust* is rather a poem than a play. Even could we listen to a modern tragedy in blank verse, our poets have forgotten how to write it for the stage, our actors how to speak it. Since Dryden, only Beddoes has produced first-rate dramatic verse, and the

verse is the only thing dramatic in Beddoes' plays. And if to-day blank verse will no longer serve us, it is not likely that any other metre will; for it is hardly possible for verse to come nearer prose, without becoming prose.[1] Yet even if good dramatic blank verse could be written, it would tend to produce the wrong effect and the wrong atmosphere. It has too much of a past, too many memories that cast a sort of glamour of unreality and remoteness over its content: the old objection to rhyme on our stage, that for the English ear it at once suggests the atmosphere of a fairy-tale, has come to apply to blank verse also. There may perhaps be no real reason why it should not be as minutely truthful to the psychology of real life as we now require; but it would not seem so.[2] If blank verse is good,

[1] Mr T. S. Eliot indeed has suggested in his preface to *Savonarola*, by Charlotte Eliot, that new verse-forms will be invented for the drama. It may be so. He suggests also that they will show the profound influence on our senses of the noise of the internal combustion engine. No doubt it is well to be prepared for the worst, but we may doubt if it will be quite so bad as that.

[2] Mr Bonamy Dobree in his interesting discussion of dramatic diction, entitled *Histriophone*, objects to modern verse-playwrights on the ground of their slowness, as contrasted with the perfect stage-prose of Shakespeare or Congreve. This seems to me true. We may recall Coleridge's description of Schiller as moving in his blank-verse "like a fly in a glue-pot"; but I find it all the more difficult to accept the contradictory suggestion earlier in Mr

it seems mock-Elizabethan: and if it is bad, it is frightful.

But if verse-tragedy has become impossible on the modern stage, and a sickly hot-house plant—with a few fine exceptions like *Atalanta in Calydon* and *The Duke of Gandia*—as a form of literature, there remains the question whether serious drama must give up poetry as well as verse. "Ibsen," Mr Yeats has written, "has sincerity and logic beyond any writer of our time, and we are all seeking to learn them at his hands; but is he not a good deal less than the greatest of all times, because he lacks beautiful and vivid language?" It is hard to judge the style of an author known to most of us only in

Dobree's essay that in Elizabethan drama prose is used as a *slower* alternative to verse. In verse the voice pauses not only when sense, but also when metre, demands—at the ends of lines and on syllables often unimportant in themselves; how then can it be more rapid than prose when the only pauses are those of the sense? When an Elizabethan passes from verse to prose it is simply as if he came off his pedestal, took off his singing-robes, and relaxed himself. The relaxation may be simply that of rest, or of humour after seriousness, or of cynicism and disillusion; as, for instance, when Hamlet breaks into that famous prose passage beginning with "majestical roof, fretted with golden fire," but ending with a shrug of the shoulders—"Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so." Prose has more latitude in its speed, as in other respects; but that it is generally slower in its effect than verse I cannot believe.

translation; but, granted that most modern serious drama, being realistic, has and can have little poetry in its style, it may yet preserve a certain poetry in its ideas. The phrases of Ibsen that we remember are mostly ironical or epigrammatic; but about his situations and his figures, especially in the latest plays, a strange poetry still clings, as it clings about the people of the Icelandic sagas for all the bleak brevity of their prose. It is like the sudden, unexpected beauty of the factory stacks of some modern town seen under their canopy of smoke against the red of evening. And since we live in an age of factory chimneys, it is better to gain eyes for such new beauty than to try to recreate the old loveliness by painting them green, with imitation branches, to resemble trees.

And in other ways other modern dramatists have succeeded in keeping a poetry of phrase and rhythm without lapsing into the unreality of verse.

"On ne sait pas.[1] . . . Et qu'est-ce que l'on sait? . . . Elle était peut-être de celles qui ne

[1] Maeterlinck, *Intérieur*. This little play is interesting also as a return to that primitive form of drama where the chorus was everything and action almost absent. For it consists mainly of a dialogue between a stranger and an old man, reflecting on a tragedy that has already taken place. A girl has been drowned, perhaps drowned herself; the body is being brought home from the river,

veulent rien dire, et chacun porte en soi plus d'une raison de ne plus vivre. . . . On ne voit pas dans l'âme comme on voit dans cette chambre. Elles sont toutes ainsi. . . . Elles ne disent que de choses banales; et personne ne se doute de rien. . . . On vit pendant des mois à côté de quelqu'un qui n'est plus de ce monde et dont l'âme ne peut plus s'incliner; on lui répond sans y songer: et vous voyez ce qui arrive. . . . Elles ont l'air de poupées immobiles, et tant d'évènements se passent dans leurs âmes. . . . Elles ne savent pas elles-mêmes ce qu'elles sont. . . . Elle aurait vécu comme vivent les autres. . . . Elle aurait dit jusqu'à sa mort: 'Monsieur, Madame, il pleuvra ce matin'; ou bien 'Nous allons déjeuner, nous serons treize à table'; ou bien 'Les fruits ne sont pas encore mûrs.' Elles parlent en souriant des fleurs qui sont tombées et pleurent dans l'obscurité. . . . Un ange même ne verrait pas ce qu'il faut voir; et l'homme ne comprend pas qu'après coup. . . . Hier soir, elle était là, sous la lampe comme ses sœurs et vous ne les verriez pas, telles qu'il faut les voir, si cela n'était pas arrivé. . . . Il me semble

but meanwhile the girl's family are seen in the background sitting in their lighted room, unconscious of what is approaching step by step—mute figures from first to last. For Maeterlinck's theory of a Static Drama, which shall stop and think, like Greek Tragedy, instead of passing from beginning to end in a whirlwind of murders and adulteries, see his *Le Trésor des Pauvres*.

les voir pour la première fois. . . . Il faut ajouter quelque chose à la vie ordinaire avant de pouvoir la comprendre. . . . Elles sont à vos côtés, vos yeux ne les quittent pas; et vous ne les apercevez qu'au moment où elles partent pour toujours. . . . Et cependant, l'étrange petite âme qu'elle devait avoir; la pauvre et naïve et inépuisable petite âme qu'elle a eue, mon enfant, si elle a dit ce qu'elle doit avoir dit, si elle a fait ce qu'elle doit avoir fait!"

"Salomé,[1] vous connaissez mes paons blancs, mes beaux paons blancs, qui se promènent dans le jardin entre les myrtes et les grands cyprès. Leurs becs sont dorés, et les grains qu'ils mangent sont dorés aussi, et leurs pieds sont teints de pourpre. La pluie vient quand ils crient, et quand ils se pavanent la lune se montre au ciel. Ils vont deux à deux entre les cyprès et les myrtes noirs et chacun a son esclave pour le soigner. Quelquefois ils volent à travers les arbres, et quelquefois ils couchent sur le gazon et autour de l'étang. Il n'y a pas dans le monde d'oiseaux si merveilleux. Je suis sûr que même César ne possède pas d'oiseaux aussi beaux. Eh bien! Je vous donnerai cinquante de mes paons. Ils vous suivront partout et au milieu d'eux vous serez comme la lune dans un grand nuage blanc. . . .

[1] Wilde, *Salomé*: influenced by Maeterlinck, from whose plays passages might have been quoted much more similar to this than the speech from *Intérieur*.

Je vous les donnerai tous. Je n'en ai que cent, et il n'y a aucun roi du monde qui possède des paons comme les miens, mais je vous les donnerai tous. Seulement, il faut me délier de ma parole et ne pas demander ce que vous m'avez demandé."

"Ah, cara, tutto il vostro sangue e tutte le vostre lacrime non potrebbero far rivivere un solo sorriso![1] Tutta la bontà della primavera non potrebbe far rifiorire una pianta che è lesa alla radice. Non vi tormentate dunque, Bianca Maria, non vi dolete delle cose che sono già compiute, che sono già del tempo. Io ho già messo i miei giorni e i miei sogni fuori dell'anima mia:—i giorni che sono passati, i sogni che si sono spenti. Io vorrei che nessuno avesse pietà di me, che nessuno tentasse di consolarmi. Vorrei trovare qualche cammino tranquillo per i miei piedi incerti, qualche luogo dove il sonno e il dolore si confondessero, dove non fosse strepito nè curiosità, nè alcuno vedesse o ascoltasse. E vorrei non più parlare, giacchè in certe ore della vita nessuno sa quali parole sia meglio dire e quali sia meglio tenere per sè. E vorrei, vorrei, Bianca Maria, che voi aveste fede in me come in una sorella maggiore, andatasene quietamente per aver tutto compreso e tutto perdonato . . . quietamente . . . quieta-

[1] D'Annunzio, *La Città Morta*. It is not necessary to know Italian to appreciate at least some of its general style and sound and effect.

mente . . . non lontano . . . non troppo lontano."

"Draw[1] a little back with the squabbling of fools when I am broken up with misery. I see the flames of Emain starting upward in the dark night; and because of me there will be weasels and wild cats crying on a lonely wall where there were queens and armies and red gold, the way there will be a story told of a ruined city and a raving king and a woman will be young for ever. I see the trees naked and bare, and the moon shining. Little moon, little moon of Alban, it's lonesome you'll be this night, and to-morrow night, and long nights after, and you pacing the woods beyond Glen Laoi, looking every place for Deirdre and Naisi, the two lovers who slept so sweetly with each other. . . .

"I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy, for it is I have lost a life that will be envied by great companies. It was not by a low birth I made kings uneasy, and they sitting in the halls of Emain. It was not a low thing to be slain by Conchubor, who was wise, and Naisi had no match for bravery. It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs and the loosening of the teeth. It was the choice of lives we had in the clear wood, and in the grave, we're safe, surely. . . .

"I have a little key to unlock the prison of Naisi

[1] J. M. Synge: *Deirdre of the Sorrows.*

you'd shut upon his youth for ever. Keep back, Conchubor, for the High King who is your master has put his hands between us. It was sorrows were foretold, but great joys were my share always; yet it is a cold place I must go to be with you, Naisi; and it's cold your arms will be this night that were warm about my neck so often. . . . It's a pitiful thing to be talking out when your ears are shut to me. It's a pitiful thing, Conchubor, you have done this night in Emain; yet a thing will be a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time. (*She presses the knife into her heart.*)"

After that go back and read the blank verse of Tennyson's *Queen Mary* or Browning's *Blot in the Scutcheon*; they seem written in butter. The thing to note about these four passages is the similarity of their solutions of the same problem—how to find a serious dramatic diction free from the dead hand of verse, yet not too close to life for art. They differ in many ways; and many other varying solutions can no doubt be found; but these four have in common a certain simplicity, a trick of repetition, and a pronounced rhythm. Verse is a rhythm of one pattern, repeated over and over again; here the rhythm is of many patterns and not regularly repeated; but the verbal repetitions partly

compensate. There is a real danger, in this simplified style, of dropping into affectations and *niaiseries*. But whatever the language of the theatre of the future, I do not see that the poets of the nineteenth century have produced any convincing answer to the demand made by Stendhal just a hundred years ago that drama must abandon verse.[1] Thrice a great school of tragedy has died with the decay of poetry; let us be thankful that it has learnt at last to live in prose.

Of the spectacular, the last of the six elements he names in Tragedy, Aristotle has written only a few words, though very much to the point. "Fear and pity," he says, "can be produced by spectacular means; but it is much better to produce them by the way you write your play." He may perhaps have been thinking of that famous first performance of the *Eumenides* of Æschylus when the audience was frozen with horror, and women prematurely

[1] In *Racine et Shakespeare* (1824). It is true that his objection was rather to the French Alexandrine with its conventional vocabulary, "qui dit toujours trop ou trop peu et qui sans cesse recule devant le mot propre," than to our blank verse with its greater freedom. But he definitely demanded prose-tragedy: the answer, though not exactly the answer Stendhal expected, has been Ibsen.

delivered in the theatre at the terrible appearance of the chorus. In any case this is another of those platitudes of Aristotle's which human nature has always persisted in ignoring, and so had to relearn by bitter experience over and over again. The drama has suffered from three enemies above all—the puritan, the pedant, and the theatre-manager; and of these the last has been generally the worst: for the ideal of those who stage plays has usually been to allow nothing whatever to remain imaginary in a performance, except its dramatic merit. They have often been denounced; but they have always been able successfully to appeal to the populace. Even in the ages of happiest simplicity in the theatre we may suspect that the means rather than the will was lacking to spoil it; and that the Elizabethans, whose methods seem on the whole so superior to ours, would themselves have welcomed the worst abortions of nineteenth-century realism. The Greek stage was plain, perforce; their conventions were simple owing to their religious origin, and remained so owing to religious conservatism. They even did without that darkening of the stage which seems to us one of the least dispensable aids to the weakness of our imagination. Those vast buskined and padded figures, moving slowly like Easter Island

statues in front of their changeless architectural setting, were in little danger of overleaping the barrier between art and realism. A few rags were the limit of the innovations even of Euripides. To what the Greek had thus created, the Roman added nothing except what money could buy—vulgarity. We might be already at Drury Lane.

> The curtain is kept down four hours or more,
> While horse and foot go hurrying o'er the floor,
> While crownless majesty is dragged in chains,
> Chariots succeed to chariots, wains to wains;
> While fleets of ships in long procession pass,
> And captive ivory follows captive brass. . . .
> You'd think you heard the Gargan forest roar
> Or Tuscan billows break upon the shore,
> So loud the tumult waxes when they see
> The show, the pomp, the foreign finery.
> Soon as the actor, thus bedizened, stands
> In public view, clap go ten thousand hands.
> "What said he?" Nought. "Then what's the attraction?" Why,
> Yon woollen mantle with the violet dye.[1]

Eighteen centuries later Pope echoed what history had repeated.

> The Play stands still: damn action and discourse,
> Back fly the scenes, and enter foot and horse;

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[1] Horace, *Epistles II.*, i. 189 ff: Conington's translation.

Pageants on pageants, in long order drawn,
Peers, Heralds, Bishops, Ermine, Gold, and Lawn . . .
Ah, luckless Poet! stretch thy lungs and roar,
That Bear or Elephant shall heed thee more;
While all its throats the Gallery extends,
And all the Thunder of the Pit ascends!
Loud as the Wolves, on Orcas' stormy steep,
Howl to the roarings of the Northern deep,
Such is the shout, the long-applauding note,
At Quin's high plume, or Oldfield's petticoat.

In a word, the progress of spectacle as of diction in tragedy is to be summed up as an ever-increasing realism. And it is a commonplace now that in the English theatre this process can be watched step by step with particular clearness in the transformation of the Platform to the Picture Stage, and the gradual divorce of actors and audience. The audience in the Greek theatre, without a curtain and with a chorus, was closely united to the stage which they half surrounded; still more the Elizabethans with their Apron Stage. It was the Restoration which first began to push back the actors into the midst of the newly introduced scenery and behind the proscenium arch which that scenery involved—the destined frame of the Picture Stage. The mid-eighteenth century thrust the last spectators off the stage; and the early nineteenth

finally abolished the Apron, thus cutting at the root of soliloquy and aside. The more perfect methods of lighting became, the greater grew the gulf between actor and public[1]; and Edison with his electric bulb can claim no obscure place in the annals of the theatre. So it came about that the drama, like the human race in Samuel Butler's forecast, became the slave of its own machines. In the eighteenth century, as in the fourth century B.C., the dramatist was overshadowed by the actor; in the nineteenth, as in the Rome of Augustus, the actor in his turn by the carpenter and machinist; perhaps the twentieth may see the balance redressed. For wisdom comes only by excess; and from the abuse of mechanism we may learn its use, as common sense, aided by the cinematograph, kills the sort of drama which was spectacle and little else. For those who desire to gape at moonrise over Portia's Belmont or to see a railway accident rendered to the life, can gape to-day twice as wide and as cheaply in a village picture-palace as at His Majesty's. The theatre, despite the original meaning of its name, needs an audience, not spectators; and it is excellent

[1] The tendency for drama to become merely spectacular was aggravated by the anomaly that till 1843 only three theatres were allowed in London; accordingly those three grew ever vaster and less suited to real acting.

that those whose only sense is visual, should have elsewhere to go. It is indeed not so much better and less vulgar scenery and spectacle that we want, as less scenery and spectacle altogether. Here, I think, lies the danger of such artists as Mr Gordon Craig, with those superb settings which would make us forget that "the play's the thing." Cover the Tragic Muse with gold paint, even the best gold paint, and she stifles. We do not want Stork in exchange for Log. If Blake himself came and offered his services as scene-painter, we should do well to refuse him as tactfully as possible. Better the Chinese stage with a chair for a canoe, two candlesticks and an image for a temple. Under the tyranny of the star actor we have the Prince of Denmark without *Hamlet*; under the tyranny of the theatrical artist, who wants the playwright to be his private secretary and his actors to be puppets, we shall not have even acting, let alone drama. We do not want lighting effects that make us catch our breath, or we shall have no breath left to catch over the tragic climax, and fail to see the play for the lighting. Such exaggerations are as bad as the sort of actor who cannot speak a line without flapping. The drama indeed is lost when the eye begins to steal from the ear.

VII

THE THREE UNITIES AND COMIC RELIEF

> Qu'en un lieu, qu'en un jour, un seul fait accompli
> Tienne jusqu'à la fin le théâtre rempli.
>
> BOILEAU.

THE interest of the Three Unities is mainly historical, but a brief outline of their development may be added here. It provides among other things a very clear, and unfavourable, example of the influence of critics on creative artists. Two main reasons were adduced in support of this strange trinity, both false—that Aristotle had enjoined them; and that without them a play would be, not inferior in artistic form, but incredible. It was the name, above all, of realism that was invoked to defend a rule responsible in practice for some of the most fantastically unreal situations in drama.

Aristotle had in fact insisted only that the action must have an artistic unity, free of irrelevances. He had also remarked, without forming any theory

about it, that the duration of plays was in practice generally limited to twenty-four hours or a little more. The Unity of Place he never mentions at all. The Greek theatre, with a chorus and without a curtain, did in fact generally observe the Unities of Time and Place. Without a curtain the transitions would have been difficult; and with a chorus, it was unlikely that the same dozen old men should reappear, all together, now at Athens, now at Sparta, now at Thebes; still more, that they should punctually reassemble at intervals of years. Still the convention of a choric ode covers an interval of some days in the *Agamemnon*, the *Œdipus at Colonus*, and the *Suppliants* (of Euripides); and there are changes of place in the *Eumenides* and the *Ajax*.

Passing to later times, we find Horace insisting, like Aristotle, on unity of action only. It is at the Renaissance that the mischief begins. Trissino (1529) and Cinthio (1554) reasserted the Unity of Time: Robertello (1548) narrowed it to twelve hours ("no work is done at night"), while others as arbitrarily limited the epic to one year. Scaliger (1561) cut down the allowance still further to from six to eight hours; but the phrase, "les Unités Scaligériennes" is a misnomer; and the real dis-

credit of formulating the "Three Unities" seems to belong to Castelvetro (1570). The idea now spread like the plague, that no intelligent person's imagination could lend credence to a play that was so unreal as to represent more than one place or one day. Sidney preached it; Jonson praised himself for practising it in *Volpone*, and railed at less correct playwrights in the prologue to *Every Man in his Humour*. But the victory of the critics over the artists was finally won when Richelieu, Chapelain, and the Academy conquered Corneille; who was converted to propound that the supposed duration of a play should equal the time it took to act, and that its action should be circumscribed within a single city. Milton agreed; but Dryden brought respectful objections to the cramping effects of such rules, and they always sat uneasily on English shoulders. Dennis might urge the plea of *vraisemblance* in its crudest form: "A reasonable man may delude himself so far as to fancy that he sits for the space of twelve Hours without removing, eating, or sleeping, but he must be a Devil that can fancy he does it for a Week." But Congreve, in the dedication of *The Double Dealer* (1694), complains with truth that the Unities cost endless pains in the observance without much repayment in the

result; and Farquhar in his *Discourse of Comedy* appeals with a persuasive gesture from "Aristotle" to Pit, Box, and Galleries. It only remained, as far as the English stage was concerned, for Dr Johnson to sweep what was left of the Unities into the waste-paper basket, in the Preface to his *Shakespeare*. "He that can take the stage at one time for the palace of the Ptolemies, may take it in half an hour for the promontory of Actium. . . . And where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens, and then Sicily, which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre?" It is true that, as Coleridge was to point out, Johnson exaggerates the consciousness of the spectator's disbelief, whereas it is most of the time only subconscious and suspended; and, in consequence, his attack is open to the objection that similar arguments could be used against any theatrical illusion—why dress up as a medieval king with crown and sceptre a man who is known to be neither medieval nor a king, but a hireling at two pounds ten a week? "Why, indeed?" some may say. But we do need some assistance in suspending our disbelief, and the point is merely that the Unities of Time and Place are superfluous, because their infringement is found in practice to offer no real

difficulty to the imagination. But the passage in Johnson's Preface remains one of the finest and wittiest things in his or any criticism. Little more has since been heard in England of the Three Unities, and Johnson's passage was effectively stolen by Stendhal for his attack on them in France. As an aid to illusion they were never worth what they cost in other ways; as an aid to artistic economy and perfection of form there will always be something to be said for a modified respect for them.

In connection with the Unity of Action, to the infringement of which it has often led, a word may be said on the history also of Comic Relief. Here, too, neo-classic criticism since the Renaissance shows its curious tendency to out-Greek the Greeks in strictness. Aristotle indeed says that Tragedy represents an action which is "serious"; and Greek Tragedy in practice has little Comic Relief; but it has some. This will be found, indeed, like most things of literary value, already existing in Homer; whose gods are regularly used for this purpose, as well as men like Thersites or Irus. Then the tragic trilogy was regularly followed by a tragic burlesque, called a satyric drama, of which our one perfect specimen is

the *Cyclops* of Euripides.[1] Further, the Nurse in the *Choephoræ*, Oceanus in the *Prometheus*, the Messengers in the *Antigone* and the *Bacchæ*, the Phrygian of the *Orestes*, are all partly comic figures; still more the Menelaus of the *Helen* and the rollicking Heracles of the *Alcestis*, which may claim to be the world's first romantic comedy, and was in fact a substitute for the ordinary satyric drama. We may recall, too, the famous passage at the close of Plato's *Symposium*, where among the empty wine-cups in the grey of dawn Socrates explains to the sleepy Aristophanes and Agathon that the same genius should be supreme in comedy and tragedy alike—the first whisper, as it were, of the coming of Shakespeare.

For the Middle Ages, which did not know what "incongruous" meant, and liked nothing better than to illuminate the margin of a missal (like that which Charles V. gave his mistress) with apes at play, the mixture of tragic and comic was as natural as breathing, and it produced their best dramatic work. The Townley Shepherds or the Doctor's Servant in *The Play of the Sacrament* redeem pages

[1] See version by J. T. Sheppard. It is important to be careful of Shelley's translation, which, whether or no it merits as poetry the enraptured screams of Swinburne, keeps hardly a vestige of the original humour.

of pious and wooden earnestness. Further, it was this medieval tradition, transmitted through popular interludes like *Cambises* and *Horestes*, that saved the English stage from the unmitigated solemnity of the Classical pedants and the gospel of tragedy according to Seneca. In vain the protests of Sidney and his like at this mixture of "funerals and hornpipes." Nor were choric odes of much use with an Elizabethan audience as a relief to the tension of tragedy; tragedy possessed no horrors which were not a relief after an ode in the style of *Gorboduc*. We may be thankful. The greatest Elizabethan tragedy is half the child of comedy, not only because Polonius and Macbeth's Porter and Lear's Fool produce some of the most striking scenes in their plays. Character, too, gains as much as plot; and the tragedies do not profit more by the addition of comic scenes than some of the tragic characters by the acquisition of a sense of humour. Often Shakespeare's protagonists remain throughout as serious as those of Sophocles: we hear no laughter from Macbeth or Othello. But for that very reason Hamlet and Cleopatra seem to mark a new era in the portrayal of human nature on the tragic stage.

Henceforth English drama hardly needed the brilliant defence of Dryden and Johnson to maintain

its tradition of comic relief: but in France the severity of the tragic mask remained unrelaxed for another two centuries; and it is still worth reading Hugo's attack on it in the preface to his *Cromwell*. To-day, however, the controversy seems rather idle; the only conclusion is tolerance. There is no reason why a Tragedy must be as laughterless as the house of Rosmersholm, and equally no reason why it should not. Only one rule remains about humour in Tragedy; that it must not clash with the tone of the whole. It is extraordinary how seldom this fault is found in Shakespeare and how often in his contemporaries. Mercutio and Thersites, Pandarus and Polonius, the Grave-diggers and the Porter and Cleopatra's Clown seem inconceivable in any play but their own, as if they had grown there. Nature herself does not colour her creatures more perfectly to their surroundings. It is far otherwise with *The Changeling* or *Venice Preserved*, or Flecker's *Hassan*, for all its qualities.

"Laugh, my young friends," says Nietzsche, "if you are at all determined to remain pessimists." And again, "True, I am forest and a night of dark trees; but he that is not afraid of my darkness will find banks of roses under my cypresses." So in

Tragedy; beneath her cypresses we tend to need either that laughter or the roses of poetry; and the Tragic Muse has learnt that, to hold her hearers, she must either sing sometimes, as in her Greek infancy, or sometimes smile.

VIII

CONCLUSION

Tragedy, then, is simply one fruit of the human instinct to tell stories, to reproduce and recast experience. And since the experience is often sad, so its copies. The religious ceremonies out of which Tragedy has twice arisen, chanced to lend themselves to the dramatic impulse, as the mutton-bone left from the feast lent itself to the caveman's scratchings of a mammoth; and so ritual became art. Last came the philosophers to explain this picture of life, just as they explained life itself; and in both cases their explanations have been largely nonsense. To-day as we look back on the past we may wonder how little good tragedy or indeed good drama of any sort has resulted from the efforts of centuries, as compared, for instance, with the amount of good lyric poetry or prose fiction in the world. And yet this is only to be expected, when we consider that drama is much more dependent on a peculiar combination of social circumstances, on the existence of a good audience and good acting,

as well as good dramatists; and dependent also on a wide combination of gifts in the writer himself, who has a complicated organ to play on with many stops, no simple Arcadian pipe. And what of the future? The prospects, while our society remains as it is, seem interesting rather than brilliant. Up to a point, with the growth of complexity in the study of character, the serious drama has progressed, though it has paid for that specialisation by the loss of its musical and then largely of its poetical elements. But a time comes when the analysis of character becomes too intricate for the stage. You cannot dramatise Proust. With primitive man, to think is to act; with his rather more civilised successors, to think is at least to speak; but to-day the human feelings we dwell on are often submerged in silence, often in subconsciousness. At crises men gaze into the fire, with perhaps a few inadequate sentences. What they are thinking only the novelist can tell us; and he does, to endless length. But the dramatist finds it hard to control this crowded traffic of our congested souls. Of course our intellectual habits and interests may change. We may weary of this fashion of counting every hair on our characters' heads, and then sedulously splitting it. The reign of the novel has been long and glorious.

Though Stendhal called for tragedy in prose, his own answer was *Le Rouge et le Noir*; and *Wuthering Heights* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* contains more that is truly tragic than all the abortions of the Victorian stage put together; but there are limits to the ever-increasing magnification of the novelist's microscope. And the necessities of the stage may help to remind some writers of what is to-day too easily forgotten, that art involves selection, and that some things in life remain more important and interesting than others; that it is the savage who values alike glass bead and pearl, and that the happiest offspring are not bred of promiscuity. The drama, of its nature, cannot be as complex and complete as the novel; that need not, however, be an unmixed disadvantage. We might well have a reaction towards something simpler though not therefore less subtle, a kind of writing all the better as art for not being as exhaustive as a scientific treatise or a *procès verbal*. Further, the drama is learning to profit by simpler and saner staging; and we may realise from experiments like the Maddermarket Theatre at Norwich how much can be done not only by a return to an almost Elizabethan simplicity of scenery, but also—what is even more important—with actors unspoilt by the self-con-

sciousness of the more educated classes or the self-assertiveness of the professional stage. It seems incredible, indeed, that in any civilisation at all like ours the drama should ever hold again that predominance among creative literature which it possessed under Pericles or Elizabeth; if Æschylus or Shakespeare lived to-day, it is difficult to imagine them writing only plays, if they wrote plays at all. But though hard pressed by the novel, by the cinematograph, by the ballet (as ancient tragedy under the Empire by the pantomimic dancer), the drama remains vital. It began as a marvellous combination of many arts—music and song and dance and epic narrative; it has been shorn of these; but it survives for what it alone and no other art can do. Despite the protests of Goethe and Hazlitt and Lamb, made in an age when the theatre was at its basest, good drama *well* acted is better than read. Their view does small credit to writers who certainly designed their work, not for the study, but the stage; it is a poor tribute to a cook to proclaim that her cakes make the most excellent mallets. Nothing can replace the serious drama. If it is a plant that flowers seldom, yet its roots go deep. And this enduring life of tragedy remains one of the great consolations of the tragedy of life.

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